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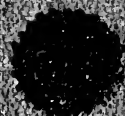
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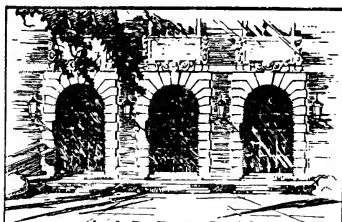
AUTHOR OF

"The Diary

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31 SOUTHAMPTON STREET, STRAND.

May 1888-

THE ILL-TEMPERED COUSIN.

A NOVEL.

BY

FRANCES ELLIOT,

AUTHOR OF 'DIARY OF AN IDLE WOMAN IN SPAIN,'
'THE RED CARDINAL,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LONDON : F. V. WHITE & CO.,
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THE ILL-TEMPERED COUSIN.

CHAPTER I.

‘**D**ID you not hear me, Miss Escott?’ asked Edward Maitland, coming forward. ‘Did I startle you?’

He spoke with that directness of purpose natural to him, an earnestness which marked all he said and all he did, even in small things. And as he spoke, he held out his hand.

Sophia took it in silence, sitting quite still.

Then, retaining it for a moment, she grew very white as she gazed up earnestly into his face. It wore the same sweet, thoughtful look she had pictured to her-

self, gazing down upon her with so much pitying tenderness.

No ! he had not changed.

‘Yes, I expected you,’ she replied, speaking very slow. She would have liked to say how much and how long, but the great rush of emotion that had come over her at sight of him, stopped her breath.

Edward took a chair and seated himself near her. Sophia’s eyes fell upon the keys ; her hand inadvertently struck a few soft chords. Those chords sounded to him a sweeter welcome than her lips had framed.

‘How marvellously you play, Miss Escott ! It is perfect inspiration ! I have been standing listening at the door for at least half-an-hour. You were dreaming—gloriously dreaming ! I saw it in your looks. Your face was transfigured.’

‘Yes—dreaming,’ she replied, striking another chord, like a plaintive cry. ‘A wild, irresistible longing for my old life seized me. Ah ! what dreams ! what hopes ! You do not know me, Mr Maitland. You preach resignation ; you cannot understand the change. You will blame me for all this, I suppose,’ she added hastily.

She threw a glance up at him from her great black eyes, a glance half smile, half

frown, but altogether appealing, that thrilled through his veins. Already this grand creature was referring to him as to her master.

‘Would you have played like that had you known I was listening?’ he asked abruptly, every sense revelling in her beauty, the pale oval of her face, the goddess-like carriage of her dark head, that Juno-like break between the eyebrows, the curve of her tall figure, the rounded bust, the slender waist, the firm blue-veined hand that wandered over the keys. What wild hopes and desires welled up within his breast! This exquisite creature must be his—his at all costs!

The passionate expression of his face passed even into the supple lines of his figure as he leaned forward, determined, if possible, to catch her eye.

‘Perhaps not; I was quite absorbed, thinking of my life in India,’ Sophia answered mournfully, all her degradation and the terrible barrier that it raised between them coming vividly to her mind. Then she looked up and smiled. ‘I do not think I could lose myself if you were by.’

There was something in the tone of her voice as she said this, that fell even more

melodiously on Edward's ear than the charm of her playing. Did she mean that she could not lose herself in anything else while he was by? There was a subtle flattery in this interpretation of her words he would fain accept.

Perhaps Sophia was conscious of this, for she added quickly,—

‘I have lived so much alone, for so long. You can hardly understand it. Music has been my world. It is the only thing I learned willingly; I lived in it, spoke in it, dreamed in it! There were no discords then,’ she added absently. ‘It was before papa died. I have not touched a piano since, except a little with Uncle Louis in the evening.’

‘You owe me no explanation,’ replied Maitland, contemplating her fixedly. How was he to form the words that trembled on his lips? Yet said they must be—and speedily; he might not again find himself alone with her. But for that cursed promise, how easy all would be. ‘It is I who have to explain how it was I intruded on you. I came into the garden,—the door was half open,—I heard a piano,—no one but you could have struck those chords. Besides—’ and the hot

blood came mantling to his cheek—‘I have been longing to see you ever since we parted. I fear it is a great liberty on my part to pay so early a visit, but I desired to hear from yourself how you were. Later I might have missed you. I could not afford that.’

A sudden light illuminated his face as he noted her growing embarrassment,—so different from the abrupt defiance of her manner when they first met in the lane.

‘You are not offended, Miss Escott?’ drawing nearer her in the desire to take her hand. With that dear hand in his, he felt he could be bolder.

‘Offended? Oh no! I have been expecting you every day. I thought you had forgotten me!’

‘Forgotten! Did you say forgotten?’ exclaimed Edward, roused from the dreamy rapture of her presence. ‘Impossible!’ A wild, audacious happiness possessed him; he was beside himself with the joy of being near her. ‘I would have come at once, but—’

He hesitated. He was hurrying on too fast. How could he tell the queenly creature before him he could not freely offer her his hand?

Sophia looked up in surprise. An exquisite twilight broke over her face, as if a warming light had caught her with sudden radiance. Their eyes met. Hers fell before the ardour of his gaze. She longed to ask him what he meant, but dared not. Was it not bliss enough to find he had not changed !

This conviction gave her courage to be natural.

‘I want to ask you,’ she said, ‘why you thought no one could strike those chords but me ?’

Her voice was almost gay ; her speaking eyes sparkled.

‘I will answer you by another question, Miss Escott. How is it that, ever since, years ago, I first heard your name, your image has always haunted me ? Yes’—he spoke rapidly, looking at her steadfastly,—‘first as an Eastern princess—a little darker perhaps than you are, but wonderfully like—crowned and girdled with jewels, seated on a glittering throne, in robes that shone like fire ; then as a slave, your brows bound with oriental draperies, bearing the waters of the Ganges along a sunburnt strand ;—as a priestess of Veda, in white robes, waving the mystic blossoms before

a veiled idol,—the colossal pillars of a Hindoo temple as a background. Then a fresh idea came to me. I pictured you as the acknowledged belle of the vice-regal ballroom, courted, adored, surrounded by admirers, — the same face — the same form—unchanged as fate ; *my* fate,' he added, in a lower tone.

Again that wild rapture seized him ; again he would have spoken, but that Sophia, who had risen from the piano, fixed upon him a glance so grave and steadfast, it checked him.

' You forget, Miss Escott, that I have heard of nothing but you for the last year.'

Some subtle note of sympathy told them both that this was not the conclusion of the sentence he had intended.

' There is nothing about me that need occupy anyone,' was Sophia's reply, spoken very coldly.

A chill had passed over her, rapturous as had been the meeting. Now, an unspoken something lay between them.

' I hope I have not annoyed you !' he exclaimed, alarmed at the change. ' Remember you honoured me by calling me your friend.'

Edward, too, had grown suddenly grave.

Frank and loyal by nature, the false position in which he found himself, deprived him of all liberty of action. In the midst of his growing love for Sophia, he was painfully conscious of a sternness about her that repelled too familiar an approach.

‘No; I am not annoyed,’ Sophia answered wearily, turning aside; ‘but I wish—I wish you would not speak to me of the past.’

‘Ah! you think you cannot trust me?’

‘Oh no! I am sure I can. From the moment we met, I felt that. But my position is so changed;—it is painful to me to allude to my former life.’

She broke off with a sigh.

‘I have hardly come to realise it yet. But I try to know my position. It is cruel, Mr Maitland, to make me forget it.’

Her voice was low, and she flashed upon him such a beseeching glance, that it cut him to the quick.

At that moment he felt keenly he ought not to have come. That which he had to say to her would at once be accepted as confirmation of her words;—a pre-arranged scheme of humiliation. He was acting a miserable part before this desolate, bereaved girl.

The idea horrified him.

‘I am proud of your confidence, Miss Escott, very proud! I think I deserve it. Do not lightly deprive me of the precious privilege. Believe me—’ and such a wave of love came over him, such a longing desire to clasp her to his heart, that his voice grew quite thick, — ‘no woman ever had a truer, a more devoted friend—’

Sophia’s look stopped him. *Only a friend!* What a chilling word! She felt as if he had stabbed her!

‘I am new to English life,’ she replied, with ill-concealed disdain. ‘Perhaps I am better without such a friend.’

She rose from the piano, and stood up, as if dismissing him. Spite of herself, her lips worked and the corners of her mouth curled scornfully.

Edward saw it all; her unspoken love, her struggle with herself. His heart ached. He watched every turn of her grand face. How well he read it, how entirely he appreciated the proud loyalty of her soul.

If he had loved her before, he adored her now.

‘Before I go, Miss Escott—’ his voice,

his attitude, were full of silent tenderness, but she would not let him catch her eye, 'before I go, tell me, I beg of you, are you happier at Scatlands than you expected?'

'No!' she answered passionately, the colour rushing back to her cheeks. 'I am miserable! But for Uncle Louis, I should run away. My aunt is most cruel to me!'

'Cruel!' ejaculated Edward; 'Mrs Winter cruel!'

'Oh! you take her part too?' she exclaimed. 'Yes; cruel! If you ask me a question, Mr Maitland, you may believe my answer,' she added, with an accent full of reproach.

'Poor Mrs Winter cannot surely be cruel, Miss Escott! You misunderstand her—'

'I say cruel,' she repeated, raising her voice, and frowning. 'I know the meaning of the word. She has already made plans for getting rid of me, before I have been here a week.'

She was on the point of telling him what had passed about John Bauer, but suddenly changed her mind. He had not deserved such an excess of confidence.

'There must be some mistake,' was his

answer, spoken gently. 'Shall I speak to her? remonstrate—?'

'No! no!' cried Sophia, colouring to the roots of her hair. 'Pray do not think of it! What would Aunt Amelia think of me? Why, Mr Maitland, you are a perfect stranger to me. I do not even know your mother.'

Edward bit his lip violently. His false position hampered him at every turn.

'That is true, Miss Escott; it might be misunderstood. My mother has not the pleasure of knowing you. I regret to say she has been a little indisposed, or she would have called.'

'Indisposed?' retorted Sophia, who had observed his confusion at the mention of his mother's name. 'Yet I have seen her passing down the lane repeatedly; two ladies (I believe she has a companion) coming from the side of the Thames. As there is no other house, they must have come from yours. But I did not mean that. Do you think, Mr Maitland, that I—a dependant here—expect your mother or anyone else to visit me. I had imagined there was a great intimacy between my aunt and Mrs Maitland; I had heard so. It appears I was mistaken, or I have

driven her away. If we had been seeing each other very often, it might have been possible for you to help me. Now, there is no one.'

What could he reply? More than ever he dreaded revealing to her the truth. Was he to leave her without a word—the woman who, in his soul of souls, he had sworn should be his wife,—with the cold courtesy of an ordinary visitor?

He gave a long look at her.

She was gazing wearily out of one of the tall windows, the one where the robins hopped and pecked. There were no robins now;—nothing but the reflection of stormy rain-laden clouds that chased each other across a leaden sky.

Behind her the soft drapery of the pale yellow curtains made a background. Her head was thrown back, showing the delicate contour of her ear and neck; her pure cold face, like marble, shining out of the coils of raven hair; her large eyes wide open, her eyebrows a little raised. Nothing but her mouth showed agitation;—her lips were white, and the corners twitched nervously.

If Edward Maitland pitied himself, how much more he pitied her! One word

would have told her all, and that word he dared not utter! Fool! fool! why had he listened to his mother? An agony of repentance seized him. He felt he must touch her,—he must feel her! It was torture to stand there like a stone and see her suffer.

For a moment he took her hand,—gently, reverently,—in both his own, and raised it to his lips. He would not even so much as permit his fingers to cling to the soft, clear-veined skin, though he trembled from head to foot. Sophia's hand was cold and passive; it dropped where he laid it, upon her dress.

‘Miss Escott,’ Edward said, in a low, grave voice, with an almost solemn sweetness, ‘I am indeed a stranger to you; though, when you called me so just now, you wounded me deeply. But it is true. I dare not even help you. Your delicacy has judged rightly in this. But, for God's sake!’—how earnest he was, and how he leant over her, inhaling, as it were, the essence of her beauty—‘acquit me of trifling!’ Sophia started, but commanded herself sufficiently not to look up. ‘I am sure I have offended you.’

‘No, no,’ she answered, collecting herself, and glancing towards the door. (If Aunt Amelia should return and find her alone with Edward Maitland, what would she say?) ‘No, you could not offend me; yours was the first voice that welcomed me to England; you assisted me when I was helpless; you were very kind, very good. I am very, very grateful, Oh! do not speak of offence between us two. I cannot bear that—I cannot bear it!’ Silent tears were trembling beneath her eyelids. The tone of her voice was inexpressibly touching. ‘But you do not understand. I am so wretched! so lonely! I know I ought to learn to bear it, but it is a hard lesson. I shall in time. If I seem to you strange or impatient, remember I am not twenty, and I have already come to the end of life—’

She broke off abruptly; and moved towards the door.

‘No! no! not to the end of life!’ cried Maitland, following her. ‘Do not say that. I tell you your life has not yet begun. There are treasures in store for you. Do but trust me—trust me implicitly. Be merciful; do not misjudge me.’ His words came quickly, with the might of

suppressed passion. 'You do not know yourself, but I know you. You want some one to support you,—to comfort you,—to make life a paradise to you. Why should you not be happy? You have suffered, but that will pass. You are so young, and time is so long! There is nothing really wrong in your position, if you could but see it, and be patient. You must not be allowed to despair; you must wake up to hope—to unknown happiness.'

'And who will care to do all this?' asked Sophia, shrinking into herself.

She felt it was barbarous to probe her wounds like this and bring no remedy.

'It will come,' he answered; 'I swear to you it will come. Only have patience!'

'Patience?' returned Sophia, with a frown; 'I have had too much!'

'You must have more,—more;—and more hope.'

She looked up at him, puzzled and bewildered.

'Miss Escott, I am not a deceiver. In your position it would be a crime—a crime,' he repeated, 'and I am not a criminal.' A smile played round his firm-set mouth—a mouth in which every line inspired confidence. 'Already I knew you,' he con-

tinued, 'before I had seen you ; you interested me as no other woman had ever done before. I found out all sorts of things about you. If I speak freely, it is because of this. Yet I would be more than a friend—dearer than a brother—' Here Maitland stopped, then went on hurriedly,— 'Forgive me if I am inconsistent. Some day you will understand.'

'Some day!' Sophia caught up his words, and in a wild tone burst out,— 'Some day I hope I shall be dead! Some day!'

'Ah! Miss Escott—Sophia—do not say such terrible things. A little time is all I ask. Till then, bear with me—believe in me. Oh, God! I ask you to believe in me! More now I dare not say.'

His voice had deepened into a tone of passionate appeal. His aspect was that of a man who had taken a deliberate resolution. He was so distressed at her obvious disbelief in him, that had she not encouraged him but a little,—had she been so stern and still, he might yet have ventured to tell her all. But by no sign or motion did she lead him on to take the venture. He felt that he must go, yet he could not bring himself to leave her.

He longed so unutterably to still the beating of her heart—to lift the cloud from her dark eyes.

Again he tried to take her hand, but she purposely withdrew it. It seemed to Sophia that, without any right, Maitland was taking possession of her. She had done nothing to warrant it.

‘Mr Maitland,’ she said at last—they were standing close to the door,—‘I expect nothing from you—nothing! I have not asked anything. Let us part. This is folly!’

‘Folly?’ repeated Maitland; ‘you call it folly? That will depend on you,’ he added, colouring,—‘on you only. Mark my words. We part now, but what this meeting may lead to, depends on *you*! Beware how you sacrifice us both. One hasty word may separate us for ever. You must never speak that word!’

He could trust himself no longer. Each moment that passed brought him nearer to breaking his pledge to his mother. Without daring to take another look at Sophia, he left the room.

His head was in a whirl,—every pulse in his body beating wildly. The interview so ardently longed for by both

was over. It had been satisfactory to neither.

Sophia and he seemed drifting further and further asunder. Edward reproached himself bitterly for this. The fault was his, not Sophia's.

But at least he had learned something. He was the least vain of men, yet he could not conceal from himself that Sophia—spite of his enforced silence, spite of the false position in which it placed him—was not indifferent to him.

‘Bless her a thousand times for her faith,’ was his thought; ‘my after-life will be all too short to reward her!’

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When he was gone, Sophia stood rooted to the spot, her eyes fixed on the hall-door by which he had disappeared. A sudden impulse made her rush towards it. Why had she let him go? Why had she not told him how she had waited for him,—longed for him? She had repeated it to herself a thousand times; why not to him?

Her pride arrested her.

‘No, no!’ she cried, clenching her

hands together to stay herself. 'Am I mad? After all, what has he said? Nothing! nothing! He tells me to hope. Hope for *what*?'

A bitter laugh broke the silence of the hall. Then she sank down on a chair and buried her face in her hands. Big, scalding tears dropped through her fingers on to her black dress.

'He talked to me of the future—the future! If he loved me, he would speak of the present! He said he would not come again!'

A wave of unspeakable misery seemed to engulf her. Gone! She rose and walked hastily up and down the stone pavement, the whole interview passing rapidly before her.

'He is concealing something; I am sure he is. Every now and then he seemed as if he wanted to tell me.'

Sophia tortured herself for a reason. Her morbid nature soon supplied one. She had the bad quality of always attributing unworthy motives.

'I know what it is. He pities me! I cannot conceal my love for him;—he sees it, and pities me! I did not master myself enough. He is sorry for me. He

has not the heart to tell me so. What business had I to love him ?’

She stood still and wrung her hands, the long-suppressed tears rolling down her cheeks, yet tears could not relieve the fire within her brain.

‘Oh, Zebula !’ she cried, her voice sounding hollow in the vacant space, ‘do the spirits tell you how I suffer ?’

She pressed her hand upon her bosom. Yes, it was safe—the little phial !

‘Oh ! if you were only here and could try the cards for me, Zebula, and tell me the truth.’

Terrible sobs heaved her bosom. She had not admitted to herself how strong hope had been within her till he had come. Now he had been, and she could no longer indulge the hope of seeing him again.

Like a too-impatient wave breaking far from the shore in the midst of a troubled sea, where every crest which lifts itself must fall, she had failed ! signally failed !

Poor Sophia ! It was only the thought that Aunt Amelia might return, find her there, and ask her questions, that roused her.

She dried her eyes hastily, went back into the drawing-room, and closed the piano. Then, with the same proud step with which she had entered in the morning, she slowly mounted the dark oak staircase to her room.





CHAPTER II.

THE letter which Mrs Winter expected from her sister had now come.

Lady Danvers was to arrive on Christmas Eve.

The visit had been arranged in November, but the actual fixing of the day threw Aunt Amelia into spasms of nervous excitement.

Sophia held herself haughtily aloof;—on the whole an immense relief. Aunt Amelia would have been ashamed if her niece could have seen how much she acted as upper servant.

Another woman was engaged, and Jacob, the green-grocer's man, was engaged to wait.

When Mrs Winter first met this individual in the hall, arrayed in a black

coat and white cravat,—forgetting all the beneficent arrangements made by John Bauer in his uncle's affairs,—she all but fainted in his arms, under the impression that he was a bailiff come to arrest her husband.

‘Lord-a-mercy, marm!’ cried the man, staring into her face, pale with terror, as he raised her and set her on her feet. ‘Well, you *be* took all of a heap a-seeing a me!’

‘No, no, Jacob’—(she was blushing to the temples),—‘not you at all! I felt a little giddy. It is nothing. Go to your work, my good man; you have plenty to do.’

The Winters were put to no expense by this visit. Lady Danvers laid down an ample sum. It was her way of helping her sister. Money she would no longer give, except for special purposes. She was not naturally generous, and had undergone unheard-of persecution from Louis Winter.

Sometimes it was uncut diamonds from Amsterdam. Sometimes a picture in pawn, for which, if she would send five pounds by return of post, he would, within a week, give her five hundred pounds. Once, a set of Dresden china in white, which ‘*ein guter freund*’ had painted in London. Another

time, a request point-blank to lend him fifty pounds to buy Aunt Amelia a tea-service.

(This was rather strong on Mr Winter's part. He was, before all things, an amateur, and generally observed a kind of consistency in his demands.)

Naturally, Lady Danvers detested coming to Scatlands, and only did it from a sense of duty, to show the world—as she phrased it—that she countenanced her unfortunate sister.

‘When Amelia would insist on marrying that horrible little German Jew, I told her how it would be,’ Lady Danvers said to her friends. ‘A speculative scamp, without capital or credit, who ought to have been a music master.’

But on the present occasion there was a fresh inducement. Her only daughter, Jane—who, like all only children, was to be a prodigy, and to learn everything—had been a little over-worked, spite of the open-air life she led, and had begged so hard to spend her Christmas with the Winters, that her authoritative mamma had yielded.

From the moment the time was fixed, Mr Winter had tormented his wife with-

out ceasing by sending down all manner of things; among others, a superb set of carved ebony furniture, just arrived from an old Dutch palace at the Hague, for Lady Danvers' bedroom.

'If see zee die antiques, my Amalie, die ebonies, zee will buy, and die moneys vill pay die rent. Vonce in die rooms, die old Danvers vill tink dem vonder-fine, and herself von queen on die trone. Ach! Zee is von fools, Amalie'—turning away his squat little figure, balanced on one heel, at sight of Aunt Amelia's grave face and resolute shake of the head—'von fools! Guter God! I leeve but vid fools! Vell! vell! die schilds, die Jane, zee ees big; zee vill vont die *bijouterie*. I brings zee zom *schöne bijouterie* in die morocco. Die schilds vill make die old deevils fork out. It vill be vor me a leetle zum. Ha! ha! a leetle zum. Zay notink to die schilds dat der onkel Louis get die *bijouteries* von dem *guten freund* in Sanct-Marie, Ax—'

'Louis! Louis!' cried Mrs Winter, a more angry look on her mild face than it seemed capable of assuming, 'if you say one word more, I will write to my sister and prevent her coming.'

Mr Winter, always *au fond*, rather afraid

of his wife, drew out his red banana and blew his nose loudly, helped himself to a large pinch of snuff, contemplated her fixedly through his spectacles—still flushed and excited—then bounded off, three steps at a time, upstairs to Sophia's room.

Here he was always welcome.

Ever since that visit to the City, Uncle Louis had talked a great deal to Sophia about John Bauer. Nothing would stop him. It was not the smallest use for her to pout or scold, or even to be rude to him. He was impervious to hard words, and broken to insult.

That *die Sophie* could really be angry with him he would not believe. To Mr Winter's speculative mind, the notion of arranging a marriage between her and John Bauer presented too many alluring vistas of personal advantage to be lightly disposed of.

Besides, to do Uncle Louis justice, his affectionate heart melted towards her. He would have cut his right hand off to serve her. How much more to obtain for her an advantageous settlement with a rich husband.

So it came about that, spite of Sophia's indignant remonstrances, the conversation

did turn very often upon John Bauer; although she would not permit Aunt Amelia so much as to name him. The time selected by Uncle Louis being when they were playing together late at night, after Aunt Amelia had retired. Uncle Louis was quite scampish about late hours, and never would go to bed as long as he could find anyone to sit up with him.

(In these last days, Aunt Amelia, to her great annoyance, always found herself solemnly conducted to the foot of the stairs by Jacob, who, after bringing in a little supper, would lie in ambush outside, a ready-lighted candle in his hand.

‘Good night, Mrs Winter, ma’am,’ he would say, in a cheery voice, handing her the candlestick, ‘Good dreams, and a healthy waking in the morning ;—else in heaven, ma’am, please God!’

Jacob, who had a wife of his own, gave it as his opinion over the kitchen fire—such as it was, that fire,—‘And a smaller one, nor dustier coals, I never seed, not even at Josiah’s, where we didn’t dare to boil a kettle on Fridays,’ said the new maid, in confidence—Jacob gave it as his opinion that ‘missus was pussecuted, atween the short un who cussed in foreign tongues up

and down the house, and that mortal fine young hussey, that stepped about as if she a-wanted feather beds for her shoe-leather.'))

In the small hours, Uncle Louis would lay down his flute on the piano, and, under the excuse of arranging the music, in wildest confusion on chairs and tables—Sophia never put anything away—would talk of John Bauer, Sophia listening in dogged silence.

A remark from Uncle Louis as to the effect of a violoncello passage, accompanied by the flute, brought a flush of anger to her cheeks, as she sat at the piano.

'You do not mean to say, Uncle Louis, that I am expected to play with Mr Bauer?' she cried indignantly, lifting up her hands from the keys. 'Nothing on earth shall induce me to do so!'

In reply, Uncle Louis, turning a pair of shining spectacles upon her, his eyes sparkling with glee, ran his fingers through a shock of grey hair, growing straight from his head, winked, took a pinch of snuff scientifically on the tips of his fingers, then signed to Sophia to go on.

John Bauer had felt very unlike himself ever since that meeting with Uncle Louis

at the office ;—so unlike, indeed, that neither Mr Johnson nor any of the head clerks could make out what had come to him.

John Bauer was too thorough a man of business to neglect what he had to do, but he set about it in an absent, dilatory way, that astonished everyone. It was so different from his usual calm, decided manner, issuing his orders right and left, like a general marshalling his troops.

Before, he was generally the last person to leave the office in the dreary street, staying on to finish a letter, or keep some appointment after business hours. Now, he hurried over his work, leaving a great deal to the head clerk, and slipped away by his private door when important people were waiting to see him.

John Bauer thought a great deal about the *Conzert Stück*, but much more about Sophia Escott.

The idea of Bauer & Bauer marrying had never presented itself to him, except as a *mirage*, very dim and hazy, at a far distance. Now that Uncle Louis had brought him face to face with the possible fact, it alarmed, yet attracted him.

In business he was clear-headed and singularly courageous, but the beautiful

Anglo-Indian was a sort of speculation about which he felt altogether at sea, and the throes of terrified shyness he went through about this visit to Scotlands actually disturbed his rest.

The *Conzert Stück* was very difficult at any time. There was a great deal for the violoncello to do in a long andante, the most important movement. In his present absent state of mind, the execution seemed more trying than even a performance in public,—a predicament into which his love of music had once decoyed him.

‘You may mass your audience,’ thought John reflectively, ‘but one pair of searching eyes fixed on you every time you draw your bow, would quell the stoutest.’

Then he fell into a muse as to his personal appearance. What would Sophia think of him? The better to ascertain this, he started up and stared at himself in the glass, as if he were a stranger.

Good heavens! How ugly he was! A flat, sallow face, no whiskers, and colourless hair. No handsome girl would ever tolerate him. And his awkward manners too! In the office he feared no one; but the idea of meeting Miss Escott face to face

in the yellow drawing-room made him tremble.

Suddenly he remembered he had no light gloves. This was a reprieve.

When Aunt Amelia was alone, he went dressed as he pleased. But no gentleman could present himself before a young lady, with uncut hair and in dark gloves.

Further, it was borne into John's mind that he would do well to order a dress coat and a pair of light boots ; but, on reflection, he dismissed the idea of the boots as sheer cowardice,—simply a subterfuge to put off time.

Nevertheless, he scraped away at his violoncello with great zeal, though musically also he felt ashamed of himself, broke down in the same passages every time—continually lost the *tempo*, and produced a villainous tone.

Practise as he would, he never seemed to do any better.

Thus, Sophia Escott became a threefold terror to poor John,—as a beauty, a musician, and a possible wife. Yet, he had such a respect for Aunt Amelia that, though he trembled, he longed all the while to make acquaintance with the young lady she had selected for him.

Several times he had fixed the evening for his visit, and had packed up his violoncello and rolled his music together, ready for a start, but, at the last moment, his courage failed.

John lived at a neat little villa at Wood End, near Fulham,—a mouldy, quiet little place, with a high wall round it, covered with accumulated moss.

An Alsatian cook, much bigger than himself, with silver skewers in her hair, and a petticoat like a kilt, dealing blows right and left to those she thought deserved them, ruled supreme.

This Amazon—generally absent without leave—was much given to snaring mice and other domestic nuisances ; and was also very learned in the capture of birds,—a taste encouraged by John, who took the liveliest pleasure in these captives,—frequently purchasing the linnets and thrushes caught in his own grounds ; though he did object to a tame snake which this young person had introduced into the establishment.

John also demurred about a tawny-haired cat without a tail, which had made a sudden irruption into the garden, with a bit of rope round its neck. Still, he never

made up his mind to issue the order for its dismissal ; and the cat, finding pleasant quarters, established itself at the villa,—ending by endearing itself so much to the excellent John, that he found himself leaped upon the moment he entered the gate.

What would Uncle Louis think of his absence ? John kept asking himself, with dismay, puffing away at his meerschaum,—a red brock of Bohemian glass frothing over with Bavarian beer at his elbow.

Nothing but a long smoke out of that nobly-tinted meerschaum could relieve him.

From all which it will be seen what a homely, good fellow ‘Bauer & Bauer’ was ;—devoid of vanity, and without the faintest idea how great a match his wealth made him.

At last, as all things must have an end, so had John’s hesitations.

With well-cut hair, and a pair of light gloves in his pocket, accompanied by his violoncello and a roll of paper containing the famous *Conzert Stück* of Hümmel, John took his place one afternoon in the quick coach running from the White Horse Cellar, Piccadilly, to Twickenham, just as twilight was falling.

As John’s evil fate would have it, this

was precisely the day after Sophia had had that interview with Edward Maitland. Strange to say, no one in the house had any idea that he had crossed the threshold. Of the two servants in doors, one was on the third floor making Sophia's bed, the other in the kitchen, peeling potatoes.

Mrs Winter, as already said, had walked out.





CHAPTER III.



AND Sophia ?

Since that meeting with Maitland, she had seemed to be walking in a dream. The voices about her came to her as from afar,—the little everyday details of her monotonous life followed each other unheeded.

After that first burst of indignant grief that followed his departure, when all the wounds of her pride were set bleeding, reflection brought wiser counsel.

Something whispered to her that she could not love him as she did, and leave his heart unscathed. She had no experience to appeal to,—no Zebula to advise her ; but she judged his feelings by her own, with the intuitive philosophy of youth and passion.

Let her be humiliated as she might, she had a heart to give—and she had given it.

Yet something lay behind,—something he had not told her. Two or three times she felt sure he was on the point of speaking, then had checked himself.

What could the obstacle be? His mother?

At this thought her imperious temper welled up. His mother? What right had she to interfere? If he loved her, why should he listen to her?

She recalled his words, his looks. She went over the whole scene.

‘We part,’ he had said. ‘But what this meeting may lead to depends on you.’

Depend on her! A short mocking laugh broke the silence of her bare room. How cruel to say that!

‘Beware how you sacrifice us both! One hasty word may separate us for ever. You must never say that word!’

What did he mean by that? Why talk to her of the future,—to her, whose daily bread came with the bitterness of dependence? At this thought, she clenched her hands and set her lips tightly.

‘Fool! fool!’ she cried aloud; ‘what business have I to love him!’

Then her mood changed. Could Maitland look at her as he did and not care for her? A delicious glow came over her. She basked in the thought! All the black train of doubt, of wounded pride, impatience, and the sense of injury vanished. She would trust him. Yes! She would trust him!

With a calmer mind she sat watching the watery clouds scudding across the wintry sky,—the heavy menace of the rain-fall, and the gloomy fog which, spreading like a pall over the tree-tops, shuffled out the brief day so rapidly.

Sophia never walked out. Not even the desire to meet Edward could induce her to pass the limits of the green-door into the lane.

With her Indian habits, she could not comprehend the delight English people took in walking—Aunt Amelia, for instance, who drove herself out in all weathers, like a galley slave, to her mind.

Nevertheless, that afternoon, when the house was still, and Aunt Amelia absent, Sophia let herself out by a back door and wandered into the kitchen garden, between

the espaliered walks enclosing the sea-kale pots and the winter cabbages,—gazing up at the leafless elms, throwing bare brown branches over the wall like the arms of skeletons.

‘What a dungeon of a world!’ thought she, shivering in her black clothes as she passed along the gravel walks, with that queenly step of hers. ‘But is it not his world?—The air he breathes?—The trees that gather round him? Oh! fair and happy earth to bear my Edward! May he not be watching, too,—listening for me!’

The sound of the key of the green-door turning in the lock roused her from her trance.

She gathered up her skirts and rushed indoors, almost knocking over Jacob, established with his brushes in the hall to clean the plate, arranged before him on a tray.

‘Seeing,’ he had said to the maid, ‘it is better there nor in that darned pantry. And as to halls, a room is a room, to use or to abuse;—and when missus comes in, convenient to convince herself that Jacob never dodges,—wet or dry. Dry? Ees—I be! A little beer highly acceptable, as

a body may say, without offence. And never a drop do I get here — not so much as drainings.

‘Vat der teufel ab die Sophie in zee heads?’ asked Mr Winter, the day after Maitland’s visit, thrusting his red face into his wife’s. ‘Zee zay notink. Vat ’ave changed he?’

‘I don’t know, Louis. She tells me nothing. She looks very pale, but when I question her, she does not answer,’—and Mrs Winter sighed and stitched on in silence.

‘Ouf!’ cried Uncle Louis, plunging on the sofa. ‘Das haus is gone mad! Die Sophie not speaks,—zee Amalie not speaks,—der dragon Danvers coming,—and dat esel-kopt, dat colossal ideots Johann, not gomm!’

‘I am afraid you frightened him, Louis; he is so shy. But it does not much matter’—another sigh,—‘Sophia will never marry him. It is better he should stay away.’

‘Die schilds,’ continued Uncle Louis reflectively, scratching his ear, ‘’ave sometink in zee minds. I zee it in zee eyes. Amalie, zee must find he outs.’

Mrs Winter shook her head. The pale lilac ribbons shook too responsively. Her heart was full;—of all the evils Sophia had brought into the house, the greatest was the estrangement between herself and her husband.

‘Poor schilds! poor schilds!’ repeated Uncle Louis to himself. Then, turning suddenly upon his wife:—‘Zee, too, is changed. Zee is likes die stone monuments. Vat av zee, Amalie?’

For a moment her voice was choked,—she could hardly suppress a sob. But, determined not to inculcate Sophia, nor cause her husband pain, she tried to still the beating of her heart, and answered in a quiet voice,—

‘Nothing, Louis, nothing.’

‘Amalie, my loofe,’ was his reply, gazing at her through his spectacles, as he took her cold hand in his, ‘permit me von littel word. Zee always says, *Notink!* Ouf!’ stretching out his stout little legs, and flourishing his handkerchief. ‘Let der Danvers-teufel gomm! Zee cannot make it vorse.’ Then, rushing at the handle of the door, and bursting out of the room into the hall,—‘Sophie! Sophie!’ at the top of his voice. ‘Ceciliens-kind! Gomm down to der old

onkels and warm ees pore soul wid de musiks!’

‘Dear Louis! what a heart he has!’ Mrs Winter was saying to herself, unshed tears moistening her eyes. ‘No wonder people take him in. He never will see what Sophia is. He imputes bad motives to no one. For the first time in my life I dare not confide in him.’

Here the unbidden tears flowed down, and her coarse work dropped from her fingers. Poor, helpless little woman! what could she do? Remonstrance, devotion—all in vain; reasoning impossible; reproach equally so, with her own brother’s child.

Steps were now heard on the stairs, and a smothered sound of kissing in the hall, Uncle Louis re-appearing, triumphantly leading in Sophia by the hand, her black dress sweeping behind her like a robe of state.

‘Ach so! Ach so!’ he muttered. ‘Das ees gut! Die Sanct-Ceciliens bring de music von de skies.’

His wife’s eyes followed him as he led her to the piano. Ah! was it not just so he used to lead her long ago, and implore her to make sweet music,—hanging over her with a lover’s rapture? Long ago,

when his hair was glossy and black,—his face, if dark, comely and smooth,—and his figure slight and graceful. Now, he was old and she was broken, and another took her place! Not that she was jealous, poor soul. She was incapable of any evil feeling; but the past would cling to her. Sophia was not her child, and she was turning her husband from her!

Just as Sophia had seated herself and struck a few chords invoking the music, and Uncle Louis was busy lighting a pair of candles, his silver-mounted flute before him on the piano, a ring at the door startled them all.

Aunt Amelia leapt to her feet, as white as if she had seen a ghost; and Uncle Louis—like his wife, alarmed at unusual visitors at unseemly hours, suggesting bailiffs and inconvenient creditors—was making good his retreat behind the folds of the yellow curtains, when Jacob, holding the handle of the door, put in his white head.

‘Mum!’ addressing Mrs Winter, ‘here’s a foreign gent outside—likewise a lad with a big fiddle-case—and they says, they do, that they be cousins come to visit a ye. Won’t be denied, nohow.’

Aunt Amelia sank back on her seat, and, holding her hand to her heart, gave a little cry. Sophia rose from the piano, and Uncle Louis, bounding forward from the shelter of the yellow draperies, threw out his short arms.

‘Victoria!’ shouted he, ‘*ess ist der Johann. Hoch lebe der Bauer!* Gomm in, mein sohn!’—seeing him hesitate on the threshold—‘gomm in, mein neffe, vidout fear. Gomm quicks—quicks!’

And, darting at him, Mr Winter seized John by the hand, and before he knew where he was, still arrayed in his great-coat and wrapper, he found himself in the middle of the room.

‘Ach, mein herz! dees ist gut,’ cried Uncle Louis, wringing one of his hands, while Aunt Amelia took the other. ‘Sophie, look up! Der Johann ist gomm vid der instrument. Bravo, bravo! Johann, dies ist die Escott,’ dragging the struggling Sophia forward by main force. ‘Das Himmels-kind dat brings new live to de poor old onkels. Sophie!’ in a voice of authority—his eyes glowering through his glasses like fiery coals,—‘giff der Johann die hand—quicks, quicks!’

Sophia, too much bewildered to resist,

did as she was told, then stood like a statue. John Bauer, very pale, also stood quite still on the spot where Uncle Louis had placed him. Then the blood rushed to his face,—his head seemed to swim, and, hardly knowing what he did, he made a profound bow,—which Sophia, her eyes turned on the ground, returned with a stately curtsey.

John remembered afterwards that he had tried to unbutton one of his new gloves, but had failed ignominiously ;—that he had steadied himself sufficiently to give Aunt Amelia a kiss ;—and that Miss Escott had raised upon him a pair of piercing black eyes, and, to his extreme dismay, contemplated him fixedly from head to foot.

At this moment Jacob entered, grinning from ear to ear, carrying the violoncello in his arms like an unwieldy baby, presenting it to John, who, reddening to the roots of his sandy hair, nearly let the precious load fall in his confusion.

At last, disembarrassed of his great-coat, which Uncle Louis in his zeal almost tore from his back, he found courage to turn to Aunt Amelia and ask her how she did, his eyes the

while surreptitiously directed towards Sophia, engaged at that moment in a scuffle with Uncle Louis, who, suspecting her of some sinister intention of escape, was holding her down firmly on her seat, nodding his head up and down to his nephew.

‘Nicht wahr, Johann? Zay I not true? Is zee not beautifuls? And if de schilds vill play—Sophie!’ raising his voice, with a tighter hold upon her arm, as she still struggled to free herself,—‘be goot, I say! Sit still!’

For answer, John’s face beamed all over;—for an instant he felt himself in the seventh heaven.

Then Uncle Louis, having quieted Sophia—who, irritated as she was, had ended by laughing,—was heard speaking as from the depths of the piano,—

‘Vat de deevils ees zee about, Johann, —standing there vid der instrument like von post?’

Whenever music was in question, Uncle Louis assumed the loftiest tone of superiority over his nephew, who bore it with unquestioning meekness.

‘Ave zee no shames to keep de beautiful ladies vaiting? Zee—’ pointing to

Sophia, who grew crimson at being thus addressed. (She saw how it was to be ;— spite of her repugnance, she was to accompany John Bauer ! Yet she dared not move,—she knew Uncle Louis would have brought her back in a moment.) ‘ Sit down at de desk. Ver is das *Conzert Stück* ? Ver ? ’

There was no resisting Uncle Louis, as Aunt Amelia always said. As to poor John, when he found breath to reply, he plunged at once into a torrent of apologies, —a shy man always says too much or too little—blushed like a girl under his fair hair, and, violoncello in hand, entreated forgiveness.

‘ He was quite ready,’ he said, stealing an admiring glance at Miss Escott. No, Uncle Louis had not said a word too much ; she was superb, but terrifying with that haughty stare. ‘ He had not understood they were waiting for him. He begged Miss Escott to excuse him.’

At this Uncle Louis, too-too-ing shrilly as he tuned up his flute, winked violently in the direction of Aunt Amelia,—careful, however, that no one else should see him.

In five minutes they were off in

full execution,—Sophia leading with that firm tenderness of touch that distinguished her playing,—Uncle Louis, red in the face, getting through the quick passages and shakes in his most brilliant manner,—and poor John, following with somewhat hollow sounds, digging his bow up and down among the strings, as if determined that if not musical skill, at least manual strength should not be wanting.

When it was over, Sophia laid her hands on her lap in sullen silence, and Mr Winter bestowed some charily-administered words of praise upon the blushing John, who, every instant growing a deeper shade of crimson,—with a rapid utterance, quite amazing to himself—went on to say that he really felt utterly overwhelmed at imposing his bad playing on such a performer as Miss Escott. That he had done his best, although still very imperfect, and that he begged before leaving (it was getting late, and the Alsatian cook had a habit of wrapping herself up in such profound repose not all the knocks and thumps performed by John's powerful fist upon the door could rouse her. Occasionally he had actually been forced to sleep at a neighbouring public-house) that she herself

would give him the great pleasure of performing some *morceau* alone,—all these words being addressed for the most part to the ceiling.

As John spoke, Sophia glanced angrily in the direction of Uncle Louis, bending on her his mischievous eyes, his large mouth elongated into the broadest of grins.

Her pride was rising. The idea of John Bauer introduced to her against her will—daring to ask her to play a solo too!

Yet how to escape, with Mr Winter leaning over her? How bring herself to wound him, when he recalled her dear father so vividly to her mind?

No! thundered a hundred voices within her. No! and with a sudden start she murmured something almost inaudible about ‘the pleasure.’

John bowed and tried to answer, but the fountain of his eloquence soon ran dry.

He never knew how those first moments of conversation with Sophia passed. When he came to himself, Uncle Louis was clapping his fat hands, and shouting,—

‘Oh! oh! Ceciliens-kind! Viva die

musik! Play, play, mein schilds, to der guter Johann. Look, my Amalie,' turning to his wife and pointing to the two, 'look at die *conjounczione* of de Deities, die Venus and der Hercule!'

'If you talk nonsense, Uncle Louis,' said Sophia, rising, 'I shall go away.'

'*Nimmer, nimmer mehr*, my Sophie, my angels. Do not break di pore oheim's heart. Quicks! quicks! play,' seizing on her hands.

His look, his attitude, were so tender; the way he bent over her so fond, her set features relaxed, and she was rewarded by a resounding kiss.

'And who, may I ask, Mr Bauer,' she said, turning on him the full fire of her eyes, 'told you that I played?'

'Uncle Louis,' was John's brief reply, making her a low bow. 'The last time he called on me, he spoke much of Miss Escott.'

Sophia darted a glance from under her black eyelashes in the direction of Aunt Amelia, then at Uncle Louis. He too then had joined in the plot of that false, designing little woman, of whom she could see nothing but the cap.

How threatening her brows were as she

gazed up at him, all unconsciously putting by his silver-mounted flute, and looking so proud and happy, that even her jealous temper acquitted him of all sinister designs.

At this point Aunt Amelia chimed in from the sofa in her meek voice,—

‘I have never heard Sophia play alone. It would be a great treat.’

As she spoke she sighed. Was this magnificent creature indeed her lost brother’s child, or some brilliant changeling from another sphere?

‘Komm! komm! Sophie. Strike up; out of die heads. *Extempore*. Hang de notes; die brain ees betters.’

How she came to comply who knows—only she did; striking a few wandering cords of prelude, then breaking into a grand ‘*motif*’ from Glück’s ‘*Armida*,’ a ‘*motif*’ to set men and women’s hearts on fire, and bring down cherubim and seraphim from the skies.

John listened, enraptured, motionless; Uncle Louis, with a face as grave as Radamanthus; and Aunt Amelia, with moistened eyes, thinking of her brother in his dishonoured grave.

From the first glorified burst, Sophia

passed to a simple German air, a favourite with Uncle Louis ; the words—

‘Ah could you but possibly know,
In this bosom what sentiments meet,
Love has nothing more lovely to show,
Nor friendship more tender to greet.’

As she played suave modulations spread over the keys—like the gentle lapping of water under trees, or such as a flowing stream gives out as it meanders through summer meadows in the sun.

To John it seemed that ethereal harmonies flowed from her fingers, wafting him into celestial space. Alone! Yes! alone with Sophia!

Mark, reader, to what a point of courage this young man had attained! But music is a republic, and all are free within her boundaries. Free and bold and strong as John felt at that moment,—the yellow drawing-room transformed into a glorious temple,—the candles, stars,—the fire burning on the Dutch tiles, an altar,—and his own seat a throne, from which he could survey this glorious creature.

Nothing was too great or too fanciful for honest John ; the latent romance of his German nature stirred within him. The

whole world at that moment meant nothing but himself and Sophia Escott.

Not a word broke the hushed silence. She had ended, but the divine melody still circled within the walls. It would have been impious to speak while the vibration of those sounds lasted. She had held them spell-bound for half-an-hour. It seemed but an instant.

Uncle Louis was the first to break the silence. He was weeping copiously, and now blew his nose with the sound of a war trumpet, then darting up, clasped Sophia in his arms, but was checked by the entrance of Jacob with the supper tray. Then John Bauer, who had been sitting with hands so tightly clasped the palms really smarted, rose, and delivered himself of these words,—

‘Uncle Winter, I brought my violoncello with me, as you bid me. I have done my best ; but I wish, once and for all, to say, I will never again touch a string of my instrument in the presence of Miss Escott. No,’ continued John, growing valiant as he proceeded ; ‘and I am sure you must feel that I am right. It would be an insult to her.’

Uncle Louis nodded his head approvingly, and Sophia condescended to look pleased at this domestic ovation, in which Aunt Amelia joined.

‘I will carry my violoncello back,’ added John, ‘and, with Miss Escott’s permission, dismiss the *Conzerts Stück* for ever. I hope I may return soon,’ with a dismal glance at the clock, as the idea of not seeing Sophia again presented itself.

‘Certainly! certainly!’ burst from both Mr and Mrs Winter. ‘You are always welcome,’—and, strange to say, Sophia smiled.

Thus it came to pass that John Bauer spent his evening at Scatlands, ending with a late supper served by Jacob, who, with the cook and the maid, had been listening at the door, to what they called ‘psalm playing.’ Cook, with difficulty prevailed on to go down and fry the kidneys, saying,—‘It does a body good—it do—to listen to church playing.’ ‘Like saying prayers out of church,’ added Jacob; ‘allus good, for we be as flowers of the field, unbeknown when we shall be taken.’

Wonderful to relate, Sophia stayed to supper, Uncle Louis’s arm round her waist,

even Aunt Amelia at intervals through the meal venturing to converse with her a little, and John Bauer in silent bliss emptying brock after brock of German beer, one eye at least always on Sophia.





CHAPTER IV.

QU^TSIDE Rosebank, the morning sun was shining among the elms beside the river,—the current of the Thames streaming by reedy banks, where the swans hovered,—the smooth lawn glistening, each leaf a separate glory,—the tuft of weeping willows dipping into the water, yellowed into gold, and every one of the heterogeneous windows on that side of the house dancing in the light.

Inside, Mrs Maitland, in a violet silk dress—or pelisse, as it was then called, shot with red—that would have stood on end of itself, moved about very restless, her full, common-place face disturbed, the dignity of her aspect lessened by constant changes. She could not sit still, and was unusually silent.

For the last few days Edward had absented himself altogether until dinner-time. Then he had only come into the saloon at the same time as his father, and under some excuse or other had gone away almost immediately.

Evidently he wished to avoid her. Such a thing had never happened before.

Her only son! How shocking! How ungrateful! She, who had always sacrificed everything for him. It was all the fault of that abominable girl, Miss Escott!

So Mrs Maitland fidgeted up and down,—now refreshing herself with eau-de-Cologne, now pinching off a superfluous geranium bud, or picking a dry leaf from a camelia flower, feeling, on the whole, very thankful that she had had the resolution to stamp out that affair summarily, otherwise, nobody could tell what it might have led to.

She had warned Mrs Winter too. She was sorry to be cut off from their usual intercourse, but if Mrs Winter's company entailed that of Miss Escott, the loss must be accepted.

Some doubt rose in her mind about Lady Danvers. Lady Danvers was, in Mrs Maitland's estimate, a very great lady, of whom she liked to speak as 'My friend.'

But even the distinction conferred by the presence of Lady Danvers must be forfeited for Edward's sake.

In fact, although very angry with her son, she was thoroughly proud of the judgment and tact she had shown in the whole affair.

If Edward did not see the girl he would forget her;—if he saw her, he had given his word not to marry her. There was a great deal of comfort in all this,—only, it was so hard he should avoid *her*! It would have been so much more satisfactory to talk matters over with him, and discover some leading fact from himself derogatory to Sophia, by which she could convince him of the correctness of her views.

All this while Miss Sterne sat working with her back to the window.

Everything about Miss Sterne had an air of mystery. She held her work hidden closely under her ringlets,—when she rose, she put it in her pocket, shoving it down as if it were never to see the light again. She spoke very low, and moved about so quietly that Mrs Maitland often begged her to make more noise, as she never knew whether she was in the room or not.

One thing was very strange. Miss

Sterne received no letters. Ever since she came, Mrs Maitland had tried to discover the reason, but had always been quietly baffled. Her friends were all dead, she said. An old lady who had recommended her to Mrs Maitland in a highly eulogistic epistle, was dead also.

‘How can I have letters if there is no one to write?’ she had answered.

But this reply was not altogether satisfactory to Mrs Maitland. When had her people died? Where were they buried? Had it been a special mortality like the cholera, sweeping them all off at once, or had they fallen from a window? Had the floor given way under them? Or had they been drowned in a pleasure-boat?

Mrs Maitland had tried her on all these suppositions, but Miss Sterne never particularised. Not a single fact was to be elicited. They were dead. That was all.

Mrs Maitland felt wronged. Her companion was handsomely paid, and she could not but think that such details were included in the salary.

Then there were those continual warnings of Edward’s not to trust her.

This was strange, because it was he, in fact, who had first mentioned her to his

mother. He had heard of her, he said, at Oxford, from her brother, his intimate friend. She was an object of compassion,—a lady who had met with undeserved misfortunes.

This brother was dead also. Could anything be more provoking?

How often she had pumped her son on the subject need not be specified. Nor, that she obtained no information. But that there must be something odd about her, was forcing itself more and more clearly on her mind.

Although she was, he said, the sister of his friend, Edward never voluntarily conversed with her.

Mrs Maitland had indeed wondered at seeing how often Miss Sterne addressed herself to him in her mouse-like way, and how earnestly her eyes sought his when she thought no one was looking,—a style of behaviour she considered neither suitable nor becoming in Miss Sterne's present condition, but overlooked by her, as a fond mother will overlook covert admiration, in consideration of a son's manifold attractions.

Nor did Edward ever praise her or join in his mother's commendations. His manner was simply polite, nothing more ;

although he did show her the attention occasionally of including her in the general conversation, a civility never paid her by Mrs Maitland, who talked to her when alone in the house, seldom otherwise.

Lately, however, Edward's manner towards Miss Sterne had altered. He avoided her almost with disgust, and was often downright rude to her.

Mrs Maitland's uneasiness about her son in regard to Miss Escott, and her doubts about the genuineness of her companion, worried her extremely.

‘Miss Sterne,’ she said, looking out upon the verdant lawn, where, as I said, every blade of grass reflected the winter sunshine, ‘I want to walk. I have a headache, and a walk will do me good. I wish to pay a visit to Mrs Shorne at the Vicarage. They have asked us there so often since Edward came, and I cannot get him to go. It is so long since I have been out of the grounds. I am always in terror of meeting that horrible niece of Mrs Winter’s. With her lazy Indian habits, I daresay she lies in bed half the day. Now it is two o’clock. We shall be in no danger of meeting her if we go out

at once. We can return by the footpath through the meadows by the river. She is not likely to be there.'

Miss Sterne pocketed her work as if it were an evidence of murder, and glanced suspiciously round.

'Will you excuse me, Mrs Maitland?' she said, knitting herself together in an odd nervous way. 'I cannot walk so far as Twickenham. I am very sorry.'

'No, you will never leave the lane if you can help it. I notice that. Lately you are always hanging about opposite Scatlands, but you never tell me a word,' she added bitterly—'nothing! I think you ought to feel it your duty to vary my dull life by some information. What is Miss Escott like?'

In putting this downright question Mrs Maitland was conscious of a considerable loss of dignity. But her curiosity was so imperative, she could not help it. In her secret soul she was dying to know. It was so provoking no one would tell her.

Miss Sterne rose. There was an alarmed look in her pale eyes, as of a creature brought to bay.

'Mrs Maitland,' she said hurriedly, 'I

give you my honour I have never set eyes on Miss Escott!’

‘How strange you are, Miss Sterne, starting up like that! But you must come with me. I want you. So go and put on your things. I insist on it. I promise you, you will see nothing so ghost-like as yourself,’ added Mrs Maitland, looking after her, as she glided noiselessly towards the door.

‘I don’t know that,’ answered Miss Sterne vaguely. Then rousing herself, and lingering in the doorway, she added,— ‘You need not be afraid of meeting Miss Escott, madam.’

‘How do you know?’

‘She has plenty to do at home. She is engaged to be married to Mr Bauer, Mr Winter’s rich nephew.’

‘Who told you that?’ asked Mrs Maitland, stepping up eagerly to where she stood.

‘I know it,’ answered the little companion quietly.

‘I don’t dispute that, but who told you?’

‘I am not at liberty to mention my informant,’ was her answer, disappearing, as it were, altogether under her curls.

Mrs Maitland held up both her hands.

‘Is it possible! Well, that shows how sly the Winters must be! I never could have believed it! Been here so short a time, and managed to get her engaged already! I wonder how Mr Winter did it. With his usual lies, I suppose,—he is a most designing man! Mrs Winter, too! Never to say one word about it. (To be sure, I have only seen her once, and then I told her she had better not come here again). Poor Mr Bauer! I pity him; he has been terribly taken in! Hereditary insanity developing itself into suicidal mania!’

This was a new idea of Mrs Maitland’s respecting Sophia, of which she was longing to inform her son.

‘And such a horrible temper! They say she is killing Mrs Winter by inches! Well, I am very glad; it is a great relief to me to hear this! Mr Bauer is too good by half for her though. With all his money, too! She will make his life wretched! Even Mrs Winter cannot, I am told, deny that her temper is awful.’

‘Yes,—fiendish!’ put in Miss Sterne softly, turning up her eyes.

‘And she will ruin him too,’ continued

Mrs Maitland. 'Her habits of extravagance are quite wicked. But now, do tell me how you found this out. I must do you the credit to say you *do* find out everything. It is very hard, however, you should conceal things as you do.'

'Conceal things!' cried Miss Sterne, with a start, speaking out loud for once in her life. 'What do you mean? I have nothing to conceal. What can I, in my humble life, have to hide?'

As she spoke, her tell-tale cheeks flushed with a most unusual crimson.

Mrs Maitland gazed at her in deliberate silence.

'Don't agitate yourself, Miss Sterne,' said she, with a hard, cruel glance at the shrinking figure of her little companion. 'I have observed that lately you are dreadfully nervous. Strangely so! One would think I had accused you of committing a crime.'

Do what she would, at the word *crime* Miss Sterne gave a sudden start.

'You know,' continued Mrs Maitland, never taking her eyes off her, 'I have desired you to tell me everything which happens. You might gratify me in this.'

This was intended as a sneer, but Miss

Sterne, having recovered her self-possession, gave her such a strange, threatening look, that no more was said.

Mrs Maitland was on the whole rather afraid of Miss Sterne. With all her protestations of humility, and that helpless way of shrinking into herself, she would never allow herself to be forced into anything. Always perfectly well-bred in words, her eyes had a wild, excited look when she was subjected to close questioning, not at all agreeable; and she was (according to Mrs Maitland) dogged and determined beyond belief.

‘Well, this is great news!’ continued Mrs Maitland, conscious of having received a check, and glad to turn the conversation,—‘an immense relief to me! I am so glad! We shall get rid of that girl, and go on quietly! I wonder what Edward will say! What mischief she has done already!’ A deep sigh followed. ‘But it is all over now, thank God!’

‘Do you think Mr Edward will let Miss Escott marry Mr Bauer?’ asked Miss Sterne, speaking from under her ringlets. ‘He is very resolute.’

‘Now, really, Miss Sterne! what can my son have to do with it? You are too

ridiculous! I have forbidden him to think of that Indian girl. I have told him neither his father nor I would ever sanction his attentions. I have prevented his going to the house. Edward is the best of sons. He will never disobey me.'

Here the companion raised her head and smiled. It was a very doubtful smile, in which no feature but her mouth took part.

'Are you *quite* sure of Mr Edward, madam?' she asked. She put this question to all appearance quite innocently. 'I would not depend too much upon Miss Escott's really marrying Mr Bauer. Her engagement may be nothing but a blind to egg on Mr Maitland. A young lady may have two strings to her bow—Miss Escott is so clever.'

'Miss Sterne!' exclaimed Mrs Maitland, in great wrath, 'you are taking a liberty in doubting my son's loyalty. When I tell you I am satisfied, that ought to be enough. Go and put on your bonnet.'

The two ladies started from the front door into the radiance of the winter sun. Some golden leaves still hung upon the branches that swept across the emerald stretch of lawn—green as under the im-

press of summer suns—otherwise it was winter in all its nakedness. Yet there was such a perennial brightness about Rosebank, one forgot the season in the still brilliancy of midday, the curves of the well gravelled road, with its border of deeply-shining rhododendrons and laurel, and groups of yew and cypress, throwing out blue-green shadows.

Mrs Maitland, magnificent in sable furs, and a blue silk pelisse, elaborately trimmed with leaves and scrolls in the fashion of the day, formed the centre of the landscape; Miss Sterne, acting as her foil, thickly veiled, with scarcely a feature visible, as she stepped meekly by her side. Mrs Maitland was in high spirits. Her son was restored to her! There would be no longer any cause for estrangement. For, spite of her protestations, Mrs Maitland had not, up to the present time, by any means felt sure of him.

There was just that quiet resolution about Edward, which is the most difficult thing in the world to combat. As long as he felt himself in the right, he was immovable, and his mother was well aware that not even his sense of duty would

induce him to continue in any course of action his conscience did not approve.

She had wrung a reluctant promise from him by the arguments she had used ; but if those arguments were false, or if they involved him in any dilemma touching his honour, not even her influence would induce him to submit.

If Mrs Shorne were at home, Mrs Maitland would tell her all about it. Mrs Shorne had asked to be kept informed of everything which passed at Scatlands. Indeed, the vicissitudes of the Winter family had been for years an inexhaustible subject of conversation at Twickenham—almost, one might say, public news,—and Mrs Maitland, notwithstanding the regard she felt for Mrs Winter, had always been the first to discuss it.

Now, the sudden advent of Sophia Escott had convulsed the neighbours with amazement. Her misfortunes, her beauty, and Mrs Winter's feelings, were freely dilated on with the avidity proper to a country circle, with little society to vary the monotony of their lives.

No one had seen Sophia. This was felt to be a hardship. 'What does she do with herself? Will she never come to

church? Has her religious training been attended to?' This question Mrs Shorne had asked Mrs Winter several times.

'The vicar,' she said, 'wishes to know something of the religious views of his new parishioner,' thus imparting an orthodox tone to ordinary gossip, and raising herself into a species of social missionary touting for her reverend partner in the care of souls.

Mrs Shorne entered on the subject in a solemn tone; poor Aunt Amelia, colouring violently under questions she found it impossible to parry—specially about church—knowing that Sophia would rather be burnt on a funeral pyre like an Indian suttee, than expose herself to the curious eyes of a Twickenham congregation.

Not so the Misses Shorne. On Sundays the three sisters (who had in due rotation made their appearance at Mrs Maitland's tea-parties, and other small gatherings) filled to overflowing the square pew of the vicarage with their smart frocks and furbelows, from thence taking an intelligent survey of the congregation, specially of any stray young men who made their appearance.

'A well-brought-up family,' was the

general dictum concerning the girls. 'Sure to make useful wives.' But the beauty was Minnie. Minnie was to make a great match, removing her from the sordid sphere of curates and the militia. Already it was whispered she had refused the local attorney, and that not a curate had come to her father's house, who had not sighed the sigh of love in vain.

Minnie's great friend was Mrs Gaunt, the doctor's wife, once a governess, who assured her that she knew the world, and that so attractive and well-born a girl as herself was sure to attract attention. It was Mrs Gaunt who first drew her attention to Edward Maitland. A suggestion readily adopted not only by Minnie, but by the whole family. Yet, spite of the good advice of Mrs Gaunt and Mrs Shorne's maternal efforts in the way of dinners and luncheons, he had as yet shown no symptom to surrender.

So to the Shorne family Mrs Maitland had chiefly poured out her phials of wrath, and had so alarmed Mrs Shorne with her idea of 'hereditary madness and suicidal mania,' that, being a weak but kind-hearted woman, she had come to look on Scatlands as under a ban of social infection, and would

as soon have taken her daughters there as to a house where scarlet fever or small-pox was raging.

All this had brought Rosebank and the Vicarage into closer relations.

Formerly Mrs Maitland had been very shy of going there, and had on various occasions refused their invitations in a short, crusty way.

‘Of course the girls want to get hold of Edward. Mrs Shorne is angling for a rich husband. Very convenient to the Shornes, but not at all to me and Mr Maitland.’ (He, poor innocent man, always dragged out on such occasions). Edward himself showing the most perfect indifference to the whole party. Beyond raising his hat and wishing them good-day when they met in the road, Edward was unconscious of their very existence, except so far as the weekly appearance of the vicar, and reading the service in a voice so like a rusty saw, it annoyed him.

Lately, however, Mrs Maitland’s tactics had entirely changed. She had seen a good deal of the girls, especially of Minnie, whose adroit flattery about her dress and appearance had so won on her, that she was now quite propitiated.

‘ Really, Minnie is a very nice girl,’ she was saying to her companion, ‘ as she walked down the drive ; ‘ a superior girl, with excellent judgment. And the Shornes are a good old Cheshire family, though poor, connected with the Cottons. Mrs Shorne, too, an “ Honourable,”—sister to an Irish peer, with a name I never can remember. If Minnie really has that ten thousand pounds from an uncle people give her credit for, it would not be so bad. I should have preferred a title. With our money we ought to have rank. Lady Dorothy Maitland, or Lady Cassandra, would sound so well. But, after all, Edward might do worse. He must marry someone, to keep him out of mischief. This business of Miss Escott has quite opened my eyes. He is not to be trusted to choose for himself. Poor dear boy ! so generous and confiding, to be taken in by a harpy like that ! ’

‘ Now,’ continued Mrs Maitland, as they reached the lodge-gate, ‘ we will go on as fast as we can down the lane, past the door of Scatlands. I would not meet any of them for the world. I know I should quarrel with Mrs Winter. A woman I have been so kind to, to tell me nothing ! ’

As she spoke, the Winters' green-door opened, and Edward himself walked out. His head was bent, his hat pulled over his forehead. In his haste he nearly ran over his mother.

'My dear mater, I beg your pardon!' he exclaimed, starting back. 'I did not expect to see you.'

He tried to speak carelessly, but the accusing colour rushed over his face and neck, and his voice had a strange ring in it.

Mrs Maitland drew back, gave him a glance of severe rebuke, then arranged her dress, a little ruffled by the collision.

'I can quite understand you did not expect to see me,' she said, dryly, fixing her prominent eyes on him. 'Miss Sterne and I have indeed arrived at an unlucky moment.'

She struggled to be calm, but her voice broke with anger.

Now, if anything in the world could have annoyed Edward more than meeting his mother at that moment, it was the fact that it should be in the presence of her companion. Do what he would, he could not at once recover his self-possession.

His interview with Sophia had moved him as he had never been moved before. At that moment he was not capable of warding off his mother's attacks by assuming a careless tone.

'Where are you going, mother?' he said at last, breaking a most embarrassing silence. 'Shall I accompany you?'

'That was just what I was going to ask you to do, Edward. I think, under the circumstances,'—and she waved her hand loftily towards Scatlands,—'you will feel it is better we should have a little conversation. Miss Sterne, I will not trouble you to accompany me. I have so seldom the pleasure of speaking to my son'—these words were duly accented, and accompanied by a toss of her head—'that I mean to avail myself of the opportunity while I can.'

There was an ominous acrimony about all this that betokened a coming scene. Edward shrugged his shoulders and walked on. Miss Sterne gave one rapid glance at him, her eye flashing with strange lights, then turned short round towards the gates of Rosebank. When she was well out of hearing, she gave an

almost audible laugh, and sighed a sigh of satisfaction.

Everything was working as she desired. Maitland would never marry Sophia Escott—never! never! and she would make him love her—yes, love her, spite of himself!’





CHAPTER V.

FOR a little while Edward and his mother walked on in silence. Their way lay by the lane, under the shadow of the wall, over which the elms and laurel trees cast their shadows. Edward's heart was so full of Sophia that, the momentary annoyance past, his thoughts flew back to her so completely that he forgot his mother's presence. A grave, absent look spread over his handsome face, and the firm lines about his closed lips brought into prominence the determination which marked his character.

Mrs Maitland was watching him. Such a stern expression was new to her ; his wandering eyes, and his evident disregard of her presence, irritated her exceedingly.

‘Well, Edward,’ she said at length, impatiently, stopping short under the wall, ‘well! Is it possible you have nothing to say to me?—no excuses to make for your disobedience?’

‘None, mother; I have no excuses to make,’ he answered coldly, rousing himself from the entrancing reverie that absorbed him. ‘I have not disobeyed you.’

‘Not disobeyed me! Why, I caught you in the very act—coming out of Scatlands. How can you say so? You promised me to have nothing to do with that girl.’

‘Mother, I said nothing of the kind. I have broken no promise.’

Mrs Maitland drew herself up and laughed, a little short, scornful laugh. Then she waxed warm under her fur tippet, and became very red. Her temper was rising.

‘Come, Edward, this is all nonsense. You have allowed yourself to be made a fool of, and you will not confess it. You will not persuade me that you went into that house for any other reason than to see Miss Escott.’

‘I did go to see Miss Escott, mother;

I have no wish to deny it,' said Edward firmly. 'To see her was my sole purpose.'

'Then it is shameful—shameful of you!'—she dwelt upon the word with emphasis—'and still more shameful of the Winters to entice a young man against his parents' wishes. As to the girl herself, it is exactly the conduct I should have expected from her. I see the whole thing—it is a conspiracy organised by that old Jew cheat, Mr Winter. I will give my mind to Mrs Winter, I can tell you,—a poor, weak creature, without a will of her own! I forbade her to receive you,—I gave her my reason. She passed her word to me, she would not encourage you. I told her that, with hereditary insanity and suicidal mania in her niece's family—'

'Mother!' cried Edward, with an indignant start; 'did you do that? Is it possible you said such things? Have you lost your reason?'

'No,' she retorted, trembling all over with rage. 'Thank Heaven, my head is strong enough for both. I can think for all the family,—for you too, poor misguided youth, who cannot defend yourself!'

Here Mrs Maitland paused to take

breath. Edward's face had grown darker and darker as he listened.

'I am sorry you should address such language to me, mother. I tell you plainly I will not bear it. You must permit me to come and go as I think proper; to go where I see fit, and to meet those persons it suits me. You forget that I am three-and-twenty, and that the sort of obedience you exact would be degrading to a school-boy.'

'Oh, Edward! Edward!' cried Mrs Maitland, clasping her hands—'what words to your mother! If I were not in the highroad, and with the chance of somebody passing at any moment'—here she gave a hurried glance round, and lowered her voice—'I should cry my eyes out! And you think it right to agitate me like this! But I don't care; I will do my duty. I will save you in spite of yourself from that wicked, designing girl.'

'Mother! mother!' cried Edward, laying his hand on her arm,—'by God, these are the last words you shall ever address to me, if you speak in such terms of Miss Escott!'

Every feature in his face was set with concentrated indignation.

He thought of Sophia's grand look as she stood before the yellow curtains stifling her feelings,—her feelings for himself. He thought of the pang with which he had parted from her, unable as he was to fold her in his arms, and ask her to be his wife. He thought of the secret despair her every word betrayed. He thought of her as his dear, dear love, his heaven, his idol,—as, warm with the atmosphere of passion, the witchery of her presence was still upon him.

He thought of all this as the work of his mother, and at that instant he felt that he all but hated her.

‘Ah! it is come to this!’ exclaimed Mrs Maitland, walking rapidly on, hardly knowing what she said.

She was greatly embarrassed between her agitation and the stateliness of deportment she felt indispensable in passing along a public road. One of the gates of the villas might open at any moment, and some acquaintance find her in open altercation with her son! It was most awkward, but her excitement egged her on to speak. She could not be silent.

‘I see what it is! For the sake of that girl, you defy me. Cruel—cruel boy! Me, your mother, who have lived for you

ever since I heard your first cry, and was told I had a son.'

Edward's face grew very white.

'Mother, you distress me beyond measure! But you are assuming a position no man can permit. I have made you a promise not to marry without your consent, in the full belief that when you were convinced that the happiness of my life was at stake, you would give way. I am ready to wait. I am ready to give you time to convince yourself of the unreasoning folly of your conduct. But I am not ready to renounce Sophia Escott,—I swear I never will. No; not even for you, dear mater, whose faithful and patient devotion I so well know.'

He would have taken his mother's hand, but she flung herself from him towards the wall. The buzzing as of a thousand bees was in her ears;—for a moment she thought, she should faint—her limbs seemed to give way under her.

Where she was, for the instant she forgot; then, raising her eyes upon her silk pelisse, and the painted gates of the opposite villa, she suddenly remembered; and, with an effort so powerful her full-flushed face turned from crimson

to ashen colour—she became gradually composed.

Much that Edward had said she did not hear distinctly, with that confusion in her brain, but the word '*promise*' was clear to her.

'A promise!' she gasped out at last, in a husky voice. 'And you dare to tell me that you have kept that promise! You dare to tell me you did not go to Scatlands to make love?'

How she hissed out the words from under her bonnet strings, the nodding plumes answering to the sense.

Edward's face flushed with an angry scowl.

'Whatever took me to Scatlands, mother, neither you nor anyone else has a right to inquire into. I did not break my promise. I did not propose to Miss Escott.'

He heaved a heavy sigh, remembering how much it had cost him not to do so. The more unreasonable and violent his mother showed herself, the more bitterly he repented having made her the arbiter of his fate. It was quite evident that, far from being able to remove her objections, they were increasing under the action of her own imagination.

‘Well, Edward, I am bound to believe you.’ Here Mrs Maitland, a little mollified, slackened her pace. She was not accustomed to such rapid exercise,—her breath was gone. ‘I should be sorry to think you deliberately deceived me. You never have done so. Yet you went there. And you say you did not propose. Propose, indeed! What a notion! But do you suppose she will not boast that she has made a conquest of you?’

Edward negatived this by an indignant gesture.

Mrs Maitland continued :—

‘Well, let that be! In the meanwhile, I have something to tell you, Edward.’

Here she stopped to take breath, and with much portly stateliness drew herself up at the entrance to the highroad.

‘Now, Edward, to show you what a fool they are making of you at Scatlands, Miss Escott is at this time engaged to marry Mr Winter’s rich nephew, Mr Bauer.’

Edward fell back; he almost stumbled. In an instant he turned deadly pale.

‘It is not true—it is not true! I have but just left her. I saw her alone!’

His voice was thick and husky. Even

his mother was shocked at the effect her words had produced on him.

‘And you really want me to believe that a girl without a penny, with suicidal—’—an imperious look from her son stopped her suddenly—‘would refuse a millionaire like Mr Bauer?’

‘I do believe it—I believe it on my honour. Money would have no weight on the noble nature of Sophia Escott. Your insane prejudice against her makes you forget the high position she occupied but a few months ago. Her character was formed then,—not in her present humiliation.’

Edward spoke with unwonted vehemence. His mother’s eyes travelled all round, that she might assure herself no one was listening.

‘Sophia Escott spoke to me of herself,’ he went on to say. ‘She is not happy. The Winters may have some plan ;—if so, it is formed in ignorance of her feelings.’

As he said this, Edward stopped short. A sudden thought struck him. A light flashed into his eyes,—the natural colour flew back, mantling in his cheeks.

‘Did Miss Sterne give you this piece of information, mother?’

In his eagerness he approached her closely, and looking into her eyes, seemed to read her very soul. She would have preferred not to give up her authority. She would have liked to say she had learnt it from Mrs Winter; but with Edward in that state of excitement it was impossible.

‘Miss Sterne did tell me,’ she said at last, lowering her eyes before his.

‘Miss Sterne! Ha, ha! And you believed her! Miss Sterne—the liar!’

He laughed again. His heart felt so light, that he did not even know how to be angry.

‘Have I not warned you, mother, against that woman? She must go!’

‘She shall not go!’ cried Mrs Maitland, in a loud voice, quite forgetting for the moment they were standing in the high-road. ‘You want to deprive me of everything I like.’

‘Do not let us waste time upon Miss Sterne,’ answered Edward, every feature of his face relapsing into a look of blissful indifference; ‘that will do another day. Shall I go back to Miss Escott, and ask if it is true?’ A rush of joy came over him at the thought of finding himself

once more face to face with Sophia. 'But if I go, I warn you I shall ask her to be my wife.'

'Edward, Edward! How dare you mock me? If you go back, I keep you to your word. You can ask her to marry you, but I keep you to your promise. You dare not without my consent.'

His radiant young face fell.

'Mother, mother! you are a true tyrant.'

His whole soul was so wrought up, that he would have knelt before her on the road to supplicate her to loose him from that fatal promise; but the sound of footsteps behind them warned him that someone was approaching. It was two working men, who stared as they went by, at the mother and the son standing under the trees.

'Then I must go?' said Edward sorrowfully; 'I must leave Rosebank?'

'Leave me? No, no!' cried Mrs Maitland, glancing up proudly at his tall, erect figure and the manly beauty of his frank face,—the light of the passion within beaming in every feature. 'Oh, do not leave me, Edward, just as you are come!'

‘Yes, mother. I must be very plain with you. I have made you a promise that is costing me sufferings you do not appreciate. If you keep me to it, I must go. I cannot stay here close to Sophia Estcott, whom I love, and be silent. If I stay, I shall break my word. In the position in which you place me, I have no right to engage her affections. I feel—I think,’—he stammered, ‘she is not indifferent to me.’ Here he broke down and blushed crimson.

His mother tossed her head indignantly.

‘Indifferent to you! I should think not!’

‘Ah, mother! how little you know her! I do not dare to propose to her, and in her desolate position, to keep off others would be wicked,—base,—selfish.’

He piled up adjectives to convince himself that silence was the only line of conduct honourable towards her.

‘She must be free, free as air. I do not believe one word about Bauer. But, even if it be true—if she is engaged to him—I can but bow my head, and bear it. It is all your doing, mother, to gratify some miserable vanity. If she does marry him, I warn you, I will never forgive you!’

These bitter words were wrung from him, spite of himself. Mrs Maitland was going to reply, but he was too agitated to listen.

‘I swear that no other woman shall ever be my wife. You will make me an old man before my time, mother, if you persist in this opposition. You will be defeated; God is my witness, I will marry no one else.’

‘My dear Edward, this is all great nonsense. You have seen this girl two or three times. She is designing and unfortunate, and she has worked upon your feelings. You are young, and she is your first love. When you return, after a little while, you will have forgotten her.’

‘No, mother, no,’ answered Edward. ‘I am your son; but you have yet to learn what manner of man I am. I shall not change. Until you withdraw your restrictions on my marriage with Miss Escott, I shall not return home. Good-bye.’

He took her hand gently in both his own, and looked into her face.

The tears were swimming in Mrs Maitland’s eyes. She could with difficulty restrain them, and kept wiping them away,

as, one by one, they overcharged her eyelids.

‘Edward, Edward! I did so look forward to your coming!’ she said, with a sob. ‘At Christmas, too! And your poor father, what will he say? Don’t! don’t—’ She could not finish her sentence.

‘You can keep me if you will, mother, by one word. Say it, dear mother, say it! I implore you!’ He gazed longingly at her. ‘Oh, God! say that word!’

Mrs Maitland shook her head. She had all the obstinacy of a tyrannical nature.

‘Well, well; you think you are doing your duty. You are destroying me!’

‘Indeed, dear Edward, I do think I am doing my duty,’ she answered simply. ‘I believe I suffer as much as you.’

Edward raised his hands and sighed as if his heart were cleft in two.

‘I suffer,’ continued Mrs Maitland, feeling that on the whole she had the best of the contest, ‘in loving you too well. You must know that. If I hold out, it is because I am right. You will bless me by-and-by. You will come back to me soon, and bless me.’

‘I cannot say,’ answered Edward, looking out mournfully over the barren fields

stretching away under the fog. 'I can say nothing. All depends on you.'

They had now advanced along the pathway bordering the wide road. There under that hedgerow, broken by pollarded elms, Maitland had first seen Sophia. There, in the mud, lay her box, with the address by which he had discovered her. And there she had stood, drawn up like a queen,—a solitary figure in the November mist.

'You will soon come back dear,' repeated Mrs Maitland, nodding her head. 'Very soon.' She had grown suddenly cheerful. Better to part for a little than to lose him altogether.

'No, no!' cried Edward, recalling vividly the loneliness of his love, and how, from the first moment he had seen her, the splendour of her beauty had worked upon him. 'No, no! I shall not come unless you give me my liberty. I shall go into Berkshire for some hunting. Nothing but hard riding will suit me in my present mood. You can write to me at Eversley. I shall be about there, or in London. Now, mother, good-bye. Go on with your walk. It only distresses us to be

together. I shall go home to pack. No; I swear to Almighty God! I am not going to Scotlands,' in answer to a suspicious glance from Mrs Maitland. 'If I did, she should be mine. But I have no right to go. Make yourself easy. Good-bye, mother.'

He raised his hat. His eyes were moist,—his cheeks flushed,—the wind blew lightly, raising the delicate curls of his auburn hair from his broad white forehead.

Poor Edward! He was only twenty-three, and he was leaving behind him all he loved. No wonder his eyes were moist.

To part in anger from his mother was a real grief. Of the parting from Sophia he did not dare to think. For the time his heart was broken.

Mrs Maitland stood still. 'Such a sacrifice!' she murmured, gazing at him. 'To spend Christmas without you. Good heavens!'

Suddenly she remembered that she would be alone on the highway. She had never been there alone before. It was not suitable.

'Don't go now, Edward. Come with me to the Shornes.' I want to call there, but I do not like walking alone.'

‘Walking alone won’t hurt you, mother, at your age,’ said Edward, with a sad smile. His mother’s fits of dignity were inexpressibly comic. ‘I cannot go to the Shornes’. I should be so strange, Minnie Shorne would be disgusted, and turn me out.’

‘Ah ! I am always sacrificed !’ exclaimed Mrs Maitland tearfully, — ‘always. I think you might have done me the little favour of going with me, Edward.’

‘No, mother, you must excuse me. Good-bye,’ and in a moment he had turned back into the lane.

His mother watched his darkening figure until it vanished among the trees.

‘Dear boy. He will soon come back,’ she repeated. ‘I know it. Bless him ! He always did his duty.’

Then Mrs Maitland continued on her way.





CHAPTER VI.

IN the presence of his mother, Maitland had been brave—almost heroic. But no sooner had he turned his back on her than he began to repent the precipitancy with which he had acted.

True, she had provoked him beyond endurance, and exactly on that point on which a young man is most sensitive—his liberty of action. No man of spirit could stand that. Now Edward Maitland not only had a great deal of spirit, but he had great resolution, and was, moreover, firm to his principles, and gifted with a power of making up his mind not usual at his age.

What he felt so acutely was the sudden parting from Sophia. What would she

think of him when she heard he was gone? Did it not seem like downright desertion? How could he communicate with her,—how tell her that it was for her sake that he was leaving?—Nothing but a move in a contest which was ultimately to result in uniting them as man and wife?

He would give his mother time,—he would bear with her prejudices. But if she persisted in opposing him he would formally appeal to his father. When his influence as opposed to his mother's was brought to bear upon that hard-headed and excellent merchant, there could be no doubt, thought Edward, that he, at least, would yield to reason.

All this, however, did not mend his present position. He dare not account to Sophia for his absence. It would be too offensive to tell her the truth.

But could he not at least help her to understand him by a message, or by a note?—not coldly leave her when he had quarrelled with his dear mater for her sake, and was willing to sacrifice everything he had in the world to bring them together.

Here the awkwardness of his position quite overcame him. Confound it! what

could he say to Sophia if he wrote? How could he go to her (which, considering he was standing a couple of stones' throw from her door, seemed the most natural course), unable as he was to offer any rational explanation?

That accursed promise! It shackled him at every turn. Even in the intoxication of her presence, he had felt what a coxcomb she must think him to stand there, and say nothing!

All this while he was gazing up at the grim, old Queen Anne house visible above wall. Ugly as that house was, it had become to him, as the shrine of a treasure—the object of intense longing.

From Sophia his thoughts glanced off to Miss Sterne. It was she who had informed his mother of Sophia's supposed engagement.

As a rule, Edward despised her too much to let his mind rest upon her; but it was certain that in his absence she would do no end of mischief. He clenched his fist with absolute rage as he thought of it. Yet was he justified in betraying her secret to his mother, because she had repeated or invented a mere piece of gossip? It certainly would not mend

matters to open the whole question of Miss Sterne at this moment. His mother would never forgive him for seconding with his influence the mysterious letter from the deceased lady,—so warmly recommending her ; although, heaven knows, his share of the deception was but an act of the purest humanity, into which he had been drawn by the entreaties of his friend.

As to John Bauer, Edward had seen him at the Winters', and could in some sort speculate upon the effect that worthy young man would produce upon the stately Sophia. Think of it as he would, he could not work himself up to the fear of a dangerous rival in Mr Bauer ; only he was at hand, and he had doomed himself to a voluntary exile.

'My darling!' he said aloud in a burst of emotion ; 'you have called me your friend. How much more am I to you ! But I will deserve that title also. Until I can ask you to be my wife, I will avoid you.'

Just at the moment he had come to this stoical resolution, driving the while a stick he carried into the hard gravel of the road with a kind of savage per-

sistence perfectly irrational, — a small neat figure in black approached, and was about to pass him, when he turned and found himself face to face with Mrs Winter.

Aunt Amelia, conscious of his mother's late harangue on the subject of Edward's visits to Scatlands, as she bowed, coloured, and endeavoured to take the opposite side. But Edward, who greeted her appearance as a kind of God-send, altogether frustrated her intentions by advancing and taking her hand.

'I am so glad to see you, Mrs Winter. Do forgive me for not calling oftener. I have no excuse to offer, but you must forgive me all the same.'

The look of real pleasure on his face quite satisfied Aunt Amelia that he at least took no part in his mother's rudeness.

'Ah! you are come for Christmas?' she said, with one of these soft genial smiles that made her face still pretty. 'We are all assembling for Christmas. I am expecting my sister; I have looked forward for months to her visit; but there is so much to do in our miserable house, I do not know if the pain is not greater than the pleasure.'

‘But you have Miss Escott to help you, Mrs Winter.’ Edward was conscious of a considerable difficulty of articulation in pronouncing Sophia’s name. He rushed at it as a hunter rushes at a bad fence, and cleared it. ‘You must find her assistance invaluable.’

Mrs Winter dropped her eyes on the ground, and sighed. She always did sigh when any one mentioned Sophia; and the sigh became deeper and deeper as time went on.

‘Sophia is not used to English ways, Mr Maitland,’ she answered curtly.

‘Are you reconciling Miss Escott a little more to England?’ he asked, grown bolder after the first plunge—a brilliance coming into his eyes as he named her.

Aunt Amelia must have noticed it, had she been suspicious, which she was not.

‘Why! what do you mean, Mr Maitland?’ she asked, the utmost surprise depicted in her face. ‘How do you know my niece’s opinion of England?’

Edward gave a little laugh, — then looked down at Mrs Winter, who met his gaze with a stare of the most unaffected curiosity.

‘Why, Mrs Winter, surely you must know I was the first to greet her on her arrival at Twickenham, and that I helped her to find Scatlands? I have been trying ever since to get that rascally guard who insulted her punished. It was a cruel position for her to be placed in!’

Aunt Amelia’s eyes rounded in her head as she listened with upraised face. She understood that something had been purposely hid from her, but her natural delicacy prompted her to conceal her surprise as much as possible.

‘I did not know you had met my niece,—she never told me,’ she said at last, turning quite cold at this new proof of Sophia’s duplicity and dislike. Why else conceal what it would have been so natural to tell?

Edward, too, was sensible that he had made a mistake, too late now to rectify. So, by mutual consent, the matter dropped.

Mrs Winter, full of household cares, and quite doubtful about Jacob—who, though a married man, had evinced decided indications of flirtation with the new housemaid; a state of things which made him not only more stupid than ever, but idle also; Lady Danvers was

expected to arrive that very afternoon,—was hurrying on, and had put out her hand from under her cloak to bid him good-bye, when something in his attitude arrested her.

He had not moved, nor did he seem inclined to do so, but stood drawing figures in the earth with his stick, apparently as intently as if he had come out for that sole purpose.

Suddenly, conscious that she was moving on, and that every moment he detained her made matters more difficult, Edward raised his head and said, with a little hesitation,—

‘I am going away, Mrs Winter—I fear for some time—’

‘Going away, Mr Maitland? I thought you had just come to spend Christmas at home!’

‘That was my intention,’ he answered, hesitating. ‘But I am called away—I am so anxious that you should understand how much I feel—this sudden departure—without seeing more of you. And that you should explain to your niece, Miss Escott—’ Here he grew very red, and came to a sudden pause.

Aunt Amelia, hopelessly puzzled, listened in silence. She had known Edward

many a year, and they had always been excellent friends, but never before had he displayed any lively desire to inform her of his movements, or regret for the loss of her company.

‘*Explain,*’ continued Edward, savage with himself for his own nervous folly,—‘the necessity of my leaving home so suddenly, and—and for an indefinite period—without asking permission to take leave of her—’

How badly he was doing all this, Edward read in Mrs Winter’s astonished face.

‘Perhaps, as I have been able to tell you this in person,’ he continued, ‘you will be so kind, Mrs Winter, as to inform Miss Escott—I—I—had no time to come. That is—I do not know if a visit from me would be agreeable; but you will say to her—to Miss Escott, I mean, that you have seen me, and that I was overwhelmed to find that unforeseen circumstances cause me to leave.’ (Edward could not shake himself free from the charm of sending a message to Sophia,—direct to herself.) ‘Tell her I hope soon to return—’ (He forgot he had just said he was going for an indefinite period.) ‘Very soon, I trust, when I shall be able to explain why I am leaving. You

will not forget, dear Mrs Winter, to say all this to Miss Escott—specially about returning?’

Mrs Winter at this moment looked so utterly bewildered that Edward paused, and in spite of himself smiled,—one of those sweet smiles into which his features so naturally formed themselves.

There was no response on Mrs Winter’s face. From bewilderment, it had passed into an expression of distress.

Aunt Amelia, though very nervous and suffering from an incipient heart-complaint, was no fool. On the contrary, she was quick-witted, and when left to act for herself, of excellent judgment.

A whole revelation came to her with these words.

Edward knew Sophia! How, she could not say. Edward was in love with her! His mother knew it and disapproved of it; and it was this which was driving him away. For this reason she had forbidden Sophia her house, and had affronted her old friend!

In the bitterness of her heart, Mrs Winter could, in Scripture phrase, have ‘lifted up her voice and wept.’ Sophia Escott seemed fated to be a sorrow to her.

In a low voice, and studiously avoiding the bright look on Edward's handsome face—(he was so delighted at having been able to deliver his message, that he had grown quite light-hearted)—Mrs Winter replied, very coldly,—

‘I will not fail, Mr Maitland, to deliver your message to my niece. In the meantime, pray excuse me. I must return home.’

‘A thousand pardons, dear Mrs Winter, for detaining you. Allow me to open the door.’

‘Oh no ; don't give yourself the trouble !’ She was hurrying on. She was so astonished, that all she wanted was to get home and be alone.

‘I am so delighted I met you,’ Edward was saying, now ringing the bell. ‘I should have been grieved to go without seeing you. I only wish I had time to come in, but I fear it is impossible.’

‘Now, confound it ! why did I say that ?’ he asked himself, as he floundered in his speech. So, to cover his retreat, Edward fell to shaking hands with Mrs Winter with much effusion, she saying her good-byes to him with considerable chilliness.

Thus they parted—Edward turning into

the gates of Rosebank,—Mrs Winter climbing up the stone steps to her own door, feeling as if her heart would burst, so tumultuous was its throbbing.

Too well she understood that some new trouble was impending. If she delivered Maitland's message, Sophia would resent her having discovered her acquaintance with him, and Uncle Louis would scold her. And Lady Danvers coming! Oh, dear! Oh, dear!

For some time she could get no further than the hall, where she sat panting on one of the chairs, listening involuntarily to Jacob chattering downstairs with the new housemaid, instead of doing his work.

In her weakness and her nervousness, Aunt Amelia had come to exaggerate everything. Her life was becoming an absolute burden to her. Maitland, Sophia, Jacob, Lady Danvers,—all mixed themselves up in her brain as but a succession of tormentors.

How could she tell Sophia that Maitland was gone, just as Lady Danvers was coming? What a scene there would be! She saw her dark scowl,—she heard her contemptuous words,—the bang of the door as she strode out of the room with the air

of an imprisoned princess. Oh! how dreadful it all was.

‘Not to-day—not to-day,’ she kept repeating. ‘I cannot summon courage to tell her to-day.’

Very cowardly of Aunt Amelia, nor can I defend her, save in expressing the real dread she had of her niece’s temper. But she did, then and there, resolve, sitting on that chair in the hall, with Jacob’s voice sounding in her ears, that she would not tell Sophia anything about Edward until after Lady Danvers’ arrival.





CHAPTER VII.



AGAIN Maitland was in his own room, with the French windows opening upon the laurels,—every drawer and wardrobe thrown open,—boxes and portmanteau, gun-cases and fishing-tackle, lying on the floor,—also a carpet-bag so full that it refused to close. Not only was he packing to go away, but, in view of the length of his probable absence, he was trying to arrange his things,—all in a sort of fury.

Not for the world would he again meet his mother. His father would not return, he knew, till dinner-time. Before that hour he should be far on his way to town, leaving to his mother the care of accounting for his absence. An interview with his father at present would be a needless

aggravation, and necessitate an avowal of the cause of his departure ;—a premature avowal, for he hoped that time and absence would induce his mother to change ; in which case, that peace-loving and excellent soul, Nathaniel Maitland, need never know anything about the breach between them, and would be ready to receive Sophia as the idol of his son.

Full of all this—hurt, agitated, distressed, uncertain,—Edward rushed from side to side, cramming a suit of shooting-clothes here, a waterproof there, hunting-boots into the wrong box, a scarlet coat along with his towels, and evening clothes among knives and fish-hooks. Of course there was the inevitable box that resisted every possible endeavour to lock. He sat upon it, he stamped upon it,—in vain ! Kicking it into a corner, his bath, in the confusion, overturned,—the water quietly, but surely, inundating the floor.

This last was the climax of his misfortunes. He did not want to call a servant, and at least a quarter of an hour was consumed. Then he sat down at a table to arrange his books and writing materials. Should he, or should he not, address a few lines of adieu to his

father? But here, again, as in the case of Sophia, the difficulty of assigning an adequate motive for his departure, held him suspended.

As he hesitated, pen in hand, the sound of approaching footsteps fell upon his ear. He started up to lock the door, but before he could reach it, it opened, and Miss Sterne stood before him. Not Miss Sterne as we have seen her,—timid, reserved, docile,—but with cheeks flushed and figure erect, her fair ringlets thrown back, and a fire in her pale eye, such as he had never seen before.

‘You here?’ he exclaimed, with ill-concealed displeasure. ‘What do you want? You have driven me away. Are you come to rejoice in your success?’

His voice was so stern, his look so repellant, that she stopped half-way, and her purpose seemed to waver. Only for a moment; then she advanced, and laid her hand gently on his arm.

‘Edward,’ she said, in a voice of tender supplication,—‘Edward, are you going without telling me?’

As she spoke, a longing, a desire shot from her eyes, and the touch of her fingers tightened into a grasp. Too much

annoyed to reply, Edward drew back and looked her steadily in the face.

‘Oh, don’t stare at me like that!’ she cried, as his chilling glance fell upon her. ‘You did not look like that that night when you were dying of fever. Then you were grateful, affectionate. Oh, how sweet it was!’ The last words came from her like a whispered sigh. She was very close to him when she uttered them. ‘I was the happiest woman in the world. You were mine—all mine!’

Still her hand grasped his arm. Her bosom heaved, her breath came quickly.

Spite of himself, this reference to the past troubled Edward sorely, and arrested the hard words which were upon his lips. It was too true. He was under obligations to her,—her importunities had caused him to forget; and this consciousness weighed on him painfully.

‘Surely,’ said he, looking round at the boxes littering the floor, ‘you can judge that your presence here at this moment is singularly inopportune.’

‘I know, I know,’ she answered; ‘but why go at all? It is all for the sake of that girl, Sophia Escott. Oh, do not—do not! Let her go; she is not worth it.’

You do not believe it,' watching the expressive look of his face; 'but I know her, and so will you too, some day. Oh, my love, my love! take me instead of her. For years I have worshipped you. I ask nothing but to live under the same roof,—see you from time to time,—follow you like a dog.' Then, seizing on his hand, as he stood silent before her,—'Can you not feel? Are you a stone? Can my pulses beat so madly and leave yours unmoved?'

For some moments Edward, in his astonishment, found no words to reply. This emboldened her.

'He is mine!' sounded in her ears, with the rush of blood like a flood. His silence, his hesitation, seemed to assure her. A fresh wave of passion flushed her pallid cheeks, and she approached him so closely that her breath met his.

'You are my all, Edward,—my treasure, my very soul!' she gasped faintly through half-closed lips,—'more than my life. Heaven is where you are—joy, rapture! Only to be near you, to feel you, to breathe the same air,—ever in a delirium of hope that you will come to me at last. Shame, reproach—all—anything, so that it is with you.' A veil seemed falling

before her eyes ; her arms raised themselves to clasp him, but met the empty air. Her voice broke into sobs. ‘ Yes, I have borne a degraded life ; I have been despised for you—for you ! To be near you, to talk of you, to think of you day and night,—inhabit the rooms that speak to me of you. I have lived in hope so long that each time you return you will come to understand my love. But now, to lose you for the sake of another woman,—a stranger, who does not deserve it, whom you scarcely know,—oh, it is too much ! Have mercy ! have mercy ! I have no courage to uphold me, no hope—nothing but despair ! ’

She sank upon her knees—she clung to him convulsively, then, as she raised his hand to her lips and covered it with kisses, the comb which held back the luxuriant tresses of her pale, chesnut hair, altogether sufficient for the weight, gave way, and a mass of ringlets and plaits covered her like a veil.

Gently, very gently, Edward disengaged himself from her as she lay half-prostrate before him, and placed her in a chair, then stood over her with a grave pity more terrible to her than words.

‘Edward! Edward!’ she gasped, endeavouring still to cling to him, but he withdrew himself beyond her reach, ‘if you can give me nothing in return. Don’t speak to me! Don’t look at me! It maddens me!’

She burst into passionate tears.

‘My love! my lost love!’ she murmured, casting a long glance at him as he stood opposite to her, leaning against the mantelpiece, his head resting on his hand, a look of grave concern darkening his young face. Then quickly rising :—‘What a fool I am! I thought my love was so great, yours must follow. And so it would—’ standing up and approaching him (he retreating before her)—‘it would, but for that woman! It is not in your nature not to return love—you are too noble!’ And she sank trembling into a chair.

All this had passed so quickly—her utterance was so rapid—her vehemence so overwhelming—her appeals so piteous, that without actual violence Edward could not disengage himself from her. Nor had he even sought to do so. He was infinitely shocked: pain and distress were painted in every feature of his face. That he had pleased her fancy he understood,

but such a wild excess of passion took him utterly aback.

‘I cannot blame myself for this,’ he said at last, almost aloud. ‘I am heartily ashamed of having excited feelings I cannot return. Come to your better sense, Alicia! Be calm! Surely I have trouble enough on my hands;—you need not increase it. You say you know all about me,—perhaps you do. If so, I need not assure you that such feelings as you express are useless,—worse than useless,—agonising to me indeed! If you love me, be magnanimous! I am going away. Help me to return. You know how.’

‘What!’ cried Miss Sterne, suddenly rousing herself from the lethargy into which she had fallen; ‘at the very moment when I come to implore you but for a look—a touch, to bid me wait for years,—you dare to ask me to help you with Sophia Escott? Never! Never! The very sound of her name poisons me;—the very fact that she lives, rouses me to vengeance! You do not fear me at all, then?’ she cried, in a mocking tone, a ghastly smile breaking over her face.—‘Not at all?’

‘Do your worst!’ cried Edward, pro-

voked beyond control, spite of the real pity he felt for her. 'I will suffer no threats,—nor shall she!'

As he spoke she rose and walked rapidly up and down the room. Her complexion, pale at all times, turned to a dead whiteness, her hands tightened and crossed upon her breast.

'No, I am not ill,' she said, in answer to his inquiring look. 'I am used to suffer. I shall get over it soon.' Then suddenly lowering her tone, a change passed over her,—from excited and restless she became passive. 'Marry her! Marry her!' she murmured; 'your misery will be my best revenge!'

At this moment the clock on the mantelpiece struck the half-hour. Edward gave a start, and turned anxiously as the hand pointed to four o'clock.

'I see! I see!' she murmured, casting at him a lightning glance. 'You grudge me these last poor minutes! Cruel man! May you live to suffer the pangs you have caused me! I asked but for a little hope,—enough to drag on life upon. Even that you refuse me.'

'If you mean hope that I should return what you are pleased to call your

passion, Miss Sterne,' answered Edward firmly, looking down on the gathered-up figure before him,—so pitiful, so small,—‘I have absolutely nothing to say to you, but to repeat, that if, as you say, you care for me, your better nature will prompt you to help me to that union which alone can restore me to my home.’

These last words were too much for her. As if stung by a serpent, she pushed back the stream of flaxen ringlets that had fallen loose about her face, and flashed upon him the full power of her pale eyes. Hate, love, despair were there, and the frail helplessness of a woman bracing herself against her nature to harm what she loves best.

‘Once,’ she said, in a low voice, ‘when we spoke together here before in the night, I told you that, rather than see Sophia Escott your wife, I would drown myself in the river and brand you as my murderer! No,’ she continued, drawing her breath quickly; ‘I will not do that; it would be helping you to win her. No!—’ and her head raised itself with a snake-like action, the fair curls glistening round it like scales; ‘but from this time, I will set myself as a wall before you.

When you find yourself forestalled, deceived, forsaken, you shall say, "This is Alicia's work! This is her love!"

Suddenly, as she had entered, she left the room, with steps so inaudible that, but for the closing of the door, and the position of the chair she had occupied, Maitland might have deemed the whole scene a vision.

If anything had been wanting to add to his perplexities, it was this outburst of love and hate—a hate he felt to be so vehement that the love seemed but as a spur to intensify its action.

And this unscrupulous woman had sworn vengeance against Sophia!

'My beautiful love!' he murmured, as with a saddened face he again recommenced waging war with boxes and portmanteaux, 'God help you!'

Then there rose up in his mind the remembrance of the last glance Sophia cast on him, as she stood framed in the doorway of the yellow drawing-room, and a wild longing came over him to see her once more.

'No, no! impossible!' he cried aloud, as if in answer to the thought; 'I am pledged—I dare *not*! Rapture as it

would be to me, it is not needful. She understands me.'

Already Miss Sterne and her threats had passed from his mind. He felt so strong in his love that he could not bring himself to fear. As he had confidence in her, so Sophia would have confidence in him. True, he had said nothing, but could not those wondrous eyes read the secrets of his soul?

An hour later he was driving at a rapid pace to London, before anyone at Rosebank, except Miss Sterne, suspected that he was gone.





CHAPTER VIII.

LADY DANVERS was a great lady, not only in her own esteem, but in that of other people,—a tall, dignified woman of about forty, who never entered a room without making a sensation.

Ten years ago she had been an acknowledged belle, 'the beautiful Circassian,' as she was called, from a costume in which she appeared at a fancy ball, her head wreathed in silver gauze (we are now in the days of turbans, *gigot* sleeves, and coal-scuttle bonnets), her dress entirely composed of heavy white embroidered draperies and a profusion of diamonds.

At the present time she retained much of the stately grace and regularity of feature which had won general admiration, culminating in the offer of the hand

of the late General Sir Reginald Danvers, K.C.B., of Faulds.

No great talk of love on the occasion ; —Sir Reginald, at least thirty years her senior, was a close-shaved, grey-haired soldier, with a hard expression of countenance. But so extensive were his possessions—the bells rang for the marriage in seven different churches,—it was understood he could not be refused, and that, being artistic in his tastes, he desired to have so distinguished-looking a young lady to grace the head of his table.

The new Lady Danvers had several sisters, and a father and three brothers, all more or less impecunious,—the father specially so ; having, it was reported, passed, at various periods, some years in the precincts of the King's Bench. It was even said he had died there. After her marriage it was tacitly understood that all these relations were to be placed in *taboo*, and by no means to aspire to partake of the elegant advantages naturally accruing to their sister from an alliance with Sir Reginald—a prohibition which, it must be said, did not cost Lady Danvers much regret.

In due course of time Sir Reginald was gathered to his fathers in a vault within a country churchyard, overshadowed by a prodigious yew-tree. Lady Danvers' ideas of propriety induced her to attend the funeral (which, not being the habit in those days, created remark), taking with her her only daughter, Jane, aged seven, who nearly died of fright at the sight of the hearse, the mutes, and the coffin.

When the will was opened, Sir Reginald was found to have settled a handsome dower on his widow, and entailed the bulk of his fortune on his daughter Jane, to whom she was appointed guardian; Jane inheriting also from her grandfather large estates in Somersetshire besides.

It is not recorded that Lady Danvers shed many tears, but she wore the deepest crape trimmings that could be conveyed upon bombazine,—also the most elaborate widow's cap which skill could construct; which cap, by the way, was rather becoming to her aquiline features. Jane also was covered with black, to her extreme bewilderment; and Faulds Court, the superb Elizabethan mansion where Lady Danvers' married life had

been passed, was hermetically sealed for one year to visitors.

Everyone said, 'How perfect was Lady Danvers' conduct!' Everyone remembered her immaculate demeanour as the handsome wife to an elderly husband, and several single men residing in the neighbourhood (in view of her excellent jointure) determined to lay siege to her heart as soon as the period of her widowhood was completed.

Before the end of the year this life of seclusion grew very wearisome to Lady Danvers. The proper thing had been done, the line cut—as with a knife—which excluded her from the outer world. Everyone had written letters expressing the warmest sympathy and admiration. Everyone had begged to call to offer appropriate consolation, and everyone had been refused this indulgence. Yet, gratifying as all this undoubtedly was, it did not prevent dulness. One cannot live on crape and approbation,—a melancholy fact that came home to her as she struggled through the long days, dragging her heavy bombazine dress after her along the Italian terraces of Faulds, or, mounted on a pony, overlooked the operations of the home farm.

One day, when returning from this monotonous round, followed by the bailiff, who feared her too much to converse, a sudden thought struck her. From the world she was shut out. Why not invite some of her own relations to visit her?

Such an idea would never have entered her head during the lifetime of her husband. But Sir Reginald reposed calmly in the family vault in the church, under the great yew, with his coat-of-arms and military honours engraven over him; and Lady Danvers had always been fond of her sister, Mrs Winter, in her cold, formal way—an affection time had not obliterated in her well-regulated mind.

Mrs Winter was her elder by several years. From a child she recalled her gentle affection and pleasant ways. As a girl, extremely fair and pretty, though in a style totally different from Lady Danvers', Amelia had made a miserable marriage with a Frankfort merchant. None of Lady Danvers' sisters had married in the elevated world in which she lived; only her brother Charles in India was prosperous, and, with his Brahmin wife,

might be considered as forming a member of the aristocracy. The worst of it was, if she invited Amelia, Lady Danvers supposed she must accept the Frankfort merchant also, else she would not come. It was a horrid bore, but she was very dull; no one would see him, and she really had a sincere desire to be with her sister once more.

So the Winters were invited to partake of the lofty hospitalities of Faulds, and accepted. At first they were very much bewildered by the stiff and formal style of living in a great house; but Aunt Amelia soon fell into her old place beside her sister, and petted and loved Jane as only a loving aunt without children of her own can do. Louis Winter had not then distinguished himself by any of those dishonourable escapades which marked his after career. He was bright too, and pleasant, and artistic, — always amused himself and Jane; and with his silver-mounted flute, in accompaniment to his wife's piano, and his high-flown compliments, passed away the time.

Even if a stray neighbour or two was admitted, and old Field, the clergyman, came to dine on Sunday, Aunt Amelia was

always lady-like and nicely dressed, and Mr Winter fairly presentable,—a great comfort to Lady Danvers, who could enjoy her sister's society with no shock to her nerves; and Jane, an ardent, high-spirited child, perfectly unamenable to those conventional laws which lay at the foundation of Lady Danvers' system of life, conceived the most ardent and demonstrative affection for her new relations.

Thus the visit to Faulds passed off with mutual satisfaction. Aunt Amelia loved, while she revered, Lady Danvers as a superior being. Mr Winter, already falling into the slough of dangerous speculations, gazed prospectively on the riches of his sister-in-law, in regard to future *loot*; and Lady Danvers allowed herself to become interested in the Winters' concerns—a sentiment she had sternly exterminated from her breast in respect to her other sisters.

Through all her subsequent misfortunes, Lady Danvers stuck loyally to Aunt Amelia. As to inviting her again to Faulds when she resumed her place in the world, that was out of the question. It was bad enough to have poor relations, and a Jew brother-in-law who had been

several times a bankrupt, without exposing such sores to the eyes of the public. Bad enough to be tormented for money in every form the ingenious brain of a speculator could devise, and to be mixed up in the sordid details of family life, but to present her to her friends the Duchess of D—, Lady Mac—, and that ill-natured Lady T—, who made fun of everything, was simply impossible.

From time to time, when Mrs Winter had a home in which to receive her, Lady Danvers—feeling herself a thorough martyr—had paid her a short visit. Mrs Winter's world was not her world. There was no danger of meeting any of her set at Scatlands. The whole proceeding was like a religious retreat—a little trying at the time, but wonderfully remunerative to the conscience afterwards.

Besides, at times, Jane's wild attachment to her aunt and uncle (on the whole she preferred Uncle Louis, the atmosphere of fun and frolic which he evoked was so delightful) became absolutely unmanageable. Lately she had not been strong. The family doctor had ordered change, and Jane had so begged and entreated to

be taken to Scatlands to spend Christmas, that a refusal was almost impossible.

As a rule, though Jane was her only child, and she was—in her selfish way—very fond of her, Lady Danvers was by no means an indulgent mother.

She was full of fancies. Jane was to be brought up not to know she was an heiress. Not a servant at Faulds but was made aware that to hint at such a fact was to ensure instant dismissal. Miss Oxly, the governess, was specially enjoined to silence, and even flatly to deny it, should any report reach Jane's ears. Jane was also to be severely trained to make her strong-minded and strong-limbed;—to be awoke in the cold winter mornings at six o'clock to come down shivering to practise the piano;—to live in the open air as much as possible;—to read what books she pleased in her father's library, and always to be in the wrong in any squabbles with her governess.

On the present occasion, Lady Danvers had only allowed herself to yield under protest. Contact with Aunt Amelia was always attended with difficulty in regard to Mr Winter. There was some fatality, she thought, in her family, from whom

she had done wisely to keep herself aloof. All her sisters had made bad marriages; and now, even her brother Charles had shot himself, and his daughter had returned to England, a beggar. Charles! her only creditable relative—it was too hard. She actually shuddered as she thought of it. Certainly she ought not to have consented to take Jane to Scatlands; but she was so constant and overwhelming in her entreaties, and looked so pale and thin, she really had not the heart to refuse.

‘A romp with Uncle Louis will soon make my cheeks red,’ Jane said, who protested the doctor was a fool, and that she had nothing the matter with her; ‘and you know, mamma, when he throws the sofa cushions at me, it is so delightful. Do you remember how he ran round the panelled parlour after me with his little fat legs? Oh, dear! he does make me laugh so; it must do me good.’

So the visit was planned and the day fixed. They were to arrive at Twickenham on Christmas Eve, and spend a week of the holidays at Scatlands.

Of course Lady Danvers travelled post: no one in her position could do otherwise.

Post horses to her own close carriage, with an imperial of shining leather on the roof, and a box in the rumble where the servants used to sit. But, on the present occasion, rather than introduce any of her establishment into the promiscuousness of the Winter household, Lady Danvers preferred coming without a servant. So she and Jane left Faulds unattended.

The short day had dwindled into twilight when Mrs Winter, with new grey ribbons in her lace cap, and wearing her best half-mourning gown, a soft lavender silk, presented to her by Lady Danvers, sat in the yellow drawing-room listening to every sound.

Sophia—whose pallor and languor since Maitland's departure not all her efforts could conceal—sat leaning back in an arm-chair, her large eyes fixed on vacancy. It was utter abandonment. He had left her without a word. Aunt Amelia had never delivered his message—how so conscientious a person could have so acted can be only ascribed to cowardice. She was afraid of a scene.

'To-morrow, to-morrow,' she kept say-

ing to herself. 'At all events, he is gone; a few days more or less can make no difference,' and the poor little woman sat palpitating on the edge of the sofa. 'I wonder what it all means,' she thought, taking a furtive look at Sophia's immovable face, so white and still. 'I wonder whether Maitland really cares for her, or is only flirting?'

Certainly nothing in his look or manner bore this impress. His obvious anxiety to impress upon her the absolute necessity he was under to go, quite contradicted such an idea. How strange it seemed—quite a fatality—if, after all his mother had said, he should really care for Sophia! Then Mrs Winter recalled with a sigh how absolutely silent she had been about their meeting,—and what a fresh proof this was of want of confidence.

'Oh, dear! oh, dear!' she kept saying to herself; 'how difficult everything is become! Why in the world could I have been so unlucky as to have passed at the moment? Now everyone will blame me. Mrs Maitland, if she hears of it, will never forgive me; and Sophia, who resents the smallest interference, will be sure to accuse me of something dreadful.'

It was all very embarrassing and very trying, especially just at a time when she had looked forward to the quiet enjoyment of her sister's society. Nor did it take much reflection on Aunt Amelia's part to perceive how detrimental all this would be to the settlement of Sophia as John Bauer's wife. No young woman in the world could hesitate between the two, except on the score of John's riches. Now Sophia might have a thousand faults, but she was not mercenary;—the very violence of her temper forbade it.

Edward Maitland was behaving very badly, she thought. He had no right to offer any attention when his mother was so decidedly opposed to it. He was not—he could not be, a free agent. Whether Sophia cared for him or not, Mrs Winter had no chance of knowing,—but a general conviction of her niece's turn of mind, decided her in a shrewd guess that her inclinations would be very sure to fix themselves where trouble and worry were to be found.

Contrary to her usual habit when alone, Mrs Winter sat staring into the fire, not uttering a single word. Nor did Sophia. She knew from Jacob that, to the astonishment of the household, Edward

Maitland had suddenly gone,—gone on Christmas Eve, without one word of adieu—one word to explain his mysterious phrases, or to tell her when he would return. Broken with suspense and disappointment, but resolved to endure any suffering rather than show what she felt—dreading John Bauer—dreading Uncle Louis, whom she instinctively felt she could not trust, she sat on, opposite her aunt (her face now pale, now flushed, as wave after wave of emotion passed over it), the folds of her black dress falling about her like a statue. Tired of the room, tired of Saint Sebastian, who seemed to mock her with that look of holy calm, her eyes vaguely turned on Aunt Amelia's little band of robins who, encouraged by the silence, came crowding on the window sill for their evening meal.

‘Didn't you hear wheels, Sophia?’ cried Aunt Amelia, suddenly starting up, and in her haste almost upsetting the bee-hive chair. ‘Ah! it is only the baker's cart. How he does rattle by, that boy—like a coach and six! I am certain the horse will upset him some day.’ Then in another tone,—‘I cannot think what is keeping them. I hope the carriage has not broken

down, or robbers stopped them on Bagshot Heath, or Jane knocked up and obliged to sleep on the road.'

Sophia, whose patience had been sorely tried by seeing Aunt Amelia start up in the same way a dozen times during the last hour, only shrugged her shoulders. She had declared so often that, as far as she was concerned, Lady Danvers might remain at home for ever, that she was tired of repeating it.

Mrs Winter had become so accustomed to her contemptuous ways, she had ceased to notice them. The dread of not receiving her august sister in a befitting manner—with Jacob so unreliable, and the cook quite capable of burning the joint and forgetting the bread-sauce for the roast turkey—(though she had told her about the dinner fifty times, and even written it down on a slip of paper and hung it up, pinned to the wall near the fire)—occupied her mind at that moment far more than Sophia.

Everything in the house that morning was in confusion. The housemaid had put coarse sheets on Lady Danvers' bed, and forgotten the muslin curtains to the window. Mr Winter had sent down from

London a large hamper of wine, which they did not want, together with a basket containing a choice tea-service of old Dresden for Lady Danvers' own use ; and Aunt Amelia had literally gone on her knees to him, to induce him to replace them in their leather case, seeing that Jacob would infallibly break every cup long before Lady Danvers' departure, and certainly drink the wine as soon as it was decanted.

A letter, too, had come from John Bauer —(how many hours the excellent John had spent over its composition in the solitude of Wood's Green, who can say ?)—telling of the deep impression Miss Escott had made on him, and requesting his aunt's permission to return,—‘ Only to be allowed to look at her,’ wrote honest John, in a strictly business hand, with dots on all the i's, and the t's crossed to such a nicety, it would have been a pleasure to look at them, to anyone less worried than Aunt Amelia.

‘ Pray, dear aunt,’ wrote John Bauer, in a flowing style, to which his hand was quite unaccustomed, ‘ think it all over, and how I had better act. Advise me ! I would wait for years, if such were Miss Escott's pleasure. All I want to feel is that I do not annoy her by coming. If you should

have an opportunity of speaking to her *in the course of time*' (these words strongly underlined), 'tell her I would not worry her for the world, but that after seeing her, I never shall change my mind.'

What was she to reply? with the idea of Edward, too, as an admirer?

A moment after this puzzling letter came her husband, upsetting all her little arrangements of the silver on the table, which she had carefully taught Jacob, and generally demoralising that person to such an extent that, when he came up later, he smelt of bad rum in such a disgusting way, that she was obliged to order him out of the room.

Like Maitland's message, Aunt Amelia put John Bauer's letter aside—the letter into her pocket, the message into the depths of her memory, until she could summon courage to deliver it.

Ah! could she but have foreseen the consequences of her silence, and how she would lay herself open to Sophia's worst suspicions of being her enemy, she would not only have repeated the message ten times over to her niece, but have hung it up all over the house, as she did the cook's directions before the fire.



CHAPTER IX.

SOPHIA, that *is* a carriage!’ cried Aunt Amelia, again starting breathlessly from the bee-hive chair. ‘I hear the wheels. I am quite sure of it! There, the postillion is cracking his whip. My love,’ to Sophia, who, finding her quite intolerable, was frowning darkly to herself, in a manner ominous of coming storms; ‘my dear girl,’ and Aunt Amelia ran across the room, and seizing both her hands, pressed them in her own; ‘please don’t be offended; I speak for your sake; but do, oh! do try to make yourself agreeable to your aunt; do it for your father’s sake; do it for mine! It is so important that Lady Danvers should like you. And Jane, too—dear little Jane.’

Sophia had no time to answer, for Aunt

Amelia was already out of the room, and standing at the hall-door, where Jacob had been stationed in permanence an hour before ; but her unspoken reply was bitter. Any allusion to her father from his sister angered instead of softening her.

‘Yes ; that you may get rid of me, Aunt Amelia ! I know your sly ways. But you won’t be troubled with me long ! My life grows very weary ! It must soon end !’

(What words would Sophia have found to express her anger, had she known of that undelivered message from Edward, with which Mrs Winter was charged ?)

Greetings between Lady Danvers and her sister and much kissing of Jane ; and various inquiries as to how she was, and assurances that she looked blooming ; inquiries after Uncle Louis from Jane ; the rustle of Lady Danvers’ silk dress ; the setting down of boxes on the stone floor ; and Mrs Winter’s interrupting her welcomes with plaintive injunctions to Jacob to take care and not upset anything, came to Sophia’s ears.

‘You are so late !’ exclaimed Mrs Winter, as the trio entered the yellow drawing-room, Aunt Amelia hanging on to the

skirts of her stately sister like a slight sapling beside a stalwart oak ; 'Sophia and I were getting dreadfully uneasy! That is Sophia,' and she pointed to the tall, slender figure erect against the light, — 'our poor Charles's daughter. Sophia, my dear, your aunt,' in a timid, pleading voice.

But Sophia neither moved nor spoke.

'Ah! my new niece,' said Lady Danvers, in a clear, hard voice, sounding over everyone's head, seating herself at the same time on a sofa near the fire, where the blue tiles gleamed out with a homely glow of comfort. Then, taking a comprehensive glance at Sophia, the yellow drawing-room, the pictures in their rich frames, the ornaments on the table, and high-backed chairs standing in front of the softly-tinted curtains, that aromatic scent of rose-leaves permeating everywhere, she gave a smile of approval.

'Very comfortable, very nice! my dear Amelia. An extremely pretty room! The carpet a little shabby, but what of that? And now, come hither, my dear, and let me have a look at you,' addressing her niece.

Without a smile or a semblance of

response, Sophia raised herself to her full height, and crossed the room to where Lady Danvers was seated, one of her aristocratic hands stretched out towards her; Aunt Amelia standing close by, vainly trying to suppress a nervous twitching about her mouth; Jane, a tall, slight girl of sixteen, with rather short petticoats, and a young face as fresh as a newly-picked rose, stationed behind, staring with all her eyes.

‘You must make allowances, sister—Sophia is shy—quite unused to English ways,’ whispered Aunt Amelia to her sister, who either did not hear, or affected not to do so; but, taking Sophia’s hand, looked fixedly into her face, kissed her on the forehead, then dropped her hand.

Overawed for a moment, Sophia bent her proud head to receive her aunt’s salute; then stood motionless, her long black eyelashes sweeping her finely-moulded cheeks. But for her excessive pallor and a trembling about her lips, she might have been judged absolutely passionless.

‘Yes, there is a great look of poor Charles,’ continued Lady Danvers, casting

on her a look of minute examination,—‘a very decided likeness.’

Apparently her scrutiny was favourable, for she gave an encouraging smile.

‘Jane, my dear,’ addressing her daughter, ‘why do you stand there? Speak to your new cousin. She is a stranger.’

Jane, coming forward, thought she had never seen anything, even in a book of beauty, so lovely as Sophia, so graceful, so slim, so elegant,—her white throat and the dark head rising out of the crape trimmings of her black dress.

A small warm hand slipped itself between Sophia’s cold fingers; a bright, smiling face looked at her timidly out of a fluff of brown hair parted from her brow, and a pleasant voice said,—

‘I am your cousin, Jane Danvers; I am very glad to see you.’

Before she was aware, a warm kiss was imprinted on her lips.

At this she drew back. A kiss was a liberty she resented. Her aunt’s kiss she could not help, but she would receive no unnecessary caresses from her other relations, specially from the daughter of Lady Danvers, who had hardly vouchsafed her any attention, and would, she

was sure, take part with Aunt Amelia against her.

‘Sophia,’ whispered Jane, still holding her hand, and fixing on her a bright pair of hazel eyes under delicately-pencilled eyebrows, suiting the hair, and a winning look of intelligence ready alike to melt into tenderness or brighten into laughter and fun, ‘you are much older than I am, and so very—’

Here Jane stumbled in her speech, blushing for a moment to consider if she might—in the face of such a superb cousin—say what was in her heart.

But her genuine admiration so completely conquered her, that she continued,—

‘You are so very beautiful that you frighten me. We must be friends! I am come here to enjoy myself; I made mamma come. Ever since I heard you had arrived from India, I have been longing to see you. Now, I am satisfied.’ And her eyes travelled with frank admiration up and down the fine lines of Sophia’s figure, from the firm, well-shaped foot to the masses of black hair wreathed round her queenly head.

Not even Sophia’s morbid nature could resist Jane’s appeal. The angry folds

melted from her features, her forehead smoothed, and she gazed back at her and smiled.

‘You are very kind, little cousin. I want a friend.’

Here she sighed as she thought of Maitland, and how little all his professions meant.

‘You want a friend?’ replied Jane, still contemplating her with wondering eyes. ‘Why, I should think everyone would worship you!’

Jane’s gushing ways were very sweet, Sophia thought, and she gazed back, shaking her head the while.

‘How little you know,’ she whispered, led on by the other’s sympathy; ‘I have no friend. You must think me strange,’ she continued, under her breath, reading all the time fresh bursts of amazement in Jane’s brown eyes; ‘by-and-by you will understand me.’

But nothing could get the surprise out of Jane’s eyes. Sophia was a being full of mystery to her. Her beauty (like a goddess, she decided), her recent misfortunes, her sudden arrival from to her a distant and almost fabulous land, her air of subdued misery, and her incompre-

hensible inuendoes exercised quite a fascination over her.

What *could* it be which made her so different from others? How she should like to know.

‘I am glad you have come!’ whispered Sophia, pleased in spite of herself. ‘I am sure I shall like you, though I never knew a girl of your age before.’

I am so glad,’ was Jane’s laconic answer, taking her eyes off her at last. ‘I understand—you mean in India. Well, you must tell me all about your life there, and the rattle-snakes and the jugglers and the nautch-girls. I look forward to it, I can tell you.’ Then looking round,—‘What a sweet, pretty room this is of Aunt Amelia’s!—just suits you, Sophia, and your black dress. How nice it must be to live among such lovely pictures! I should never be tired of looking at them!’

Before Sophia had time to reply, a diversion was made by the entrance of Jacob, bearing a silver tray with cake and wine.

As he crossed the threshold, swinging the tray forward in a most alarming way, Lady Danvers put up her glass;

and while place for the refreshments was, with difficulty, made on the overladen tables—everyone assisting, except Sophia—a sensible odour of rum spread through the delicately-scented room, emanating obviously from Jacob, standing beside the tray like a sentinel on duty.

As Aunt Amelia contemplated him in silent consternation, she suddenly remembered that, in the confusion, she had forgotten her keys upon the sideboard, and dashed out of the room to rescue them, calling to Jacob to follow, which he did, fixing a somewhat saturnine look upon the company, and retiring with a bow.

‘How can you, Jacob?’ cried she, in the solitude of the dining-room. ‘How can you? You have been drinking! Don’t talk to me. The company arrived, and so near dinner-time! Go at once, take off your livery, and put your head under the kitchen pump. Lots of water, tell the cook, to pump on you to bring you round. Go, Jacob; you are a bad man to plague me so!’

Jacob, with his arms crossed, evidently intended language; but Aunt Amelia, be-

come quite active and juvenile in the presence of her sister, managed to hustle him out of the room, and return in time to pour out the wine.

‘Where is Uncle Louis?’ Jane was asking Sophia. ‘Why is he not here?’

‘He never comes from the City so early. He will not be long.’

‘Dear old boy! You can’t think how I love him! Does he ever throw the sofa-cushions at your head, Sophia, and knot up the napkins to tie you to the leg of the table at dinner, as he did to me at Faulds? Or are you too grand?’

At this Sophia laughed outright, standing in the shadow of a screen. Jane’s love of fun was infectious.

‘If you were anyone else, Sophia—not so nice as you are—I should be awfully jealous. But I think I can bear to see him pet *you*. Can’t we go upstairs and have a chat? Now I have had a glass of wine, I feel quite fresh; and mamma and Aunt Amelia are, you see, deep in conversation?’

‘Certainly,’ replied Sophia, moving towards the door.

‘Mamma,’ said Jane, always under a

certain awe of her mother, 'I am going upstairs with Sophia to take off my hat.'

'Very well, my dear; I hope you will not tire your cousin by talking.'

The door closed on the two girls.

'She is a magnificent creature,' said Lady Danvers, looking after Sophia. 'And so distinguished too! You had not prepared me for this, Amelia. What do you mean to do with her?'

'I am sure I don't know,' answered the poor little woman, suddenly recalled to her troubles, and shrinking under her sister's eye. 'She is quite out of place here. Now, if you had her at Faulds, that would be just the position to suit her.'

'But I do not think it would suit me,' replied Lady Danvers, raising an embroidered handkerchief to her lips, then letting it fall over her jewelled fingers, as she played with the delicate lace. 'I have enough to do with my own daughter. Such a young woman as that would be a troublesome inmate. I am certain she has a bad temper, and has been dreadfully spoilt. Now, if there is one thing in the world which I insist

upon, it is obedience in my own house. Sophia would never obey.'

Aunt Amelia could not contradict this; —she said nothing, admiring meanwhile the superior acumen of her sister, in so readily reading a character which had been such a puzzle to herself.

'But as a companion to Jane?' she suggested. 'Jane must have a dull life now she is growing up. Her cousin would suit well for that.'

'I am not so sure of it,' responded Lady Danvers. 'Her wilfulness might be infectious. But I agree with you that this is no place for a beautiful girl like her; nor is Mr Winter a suitable guardian.'

Aunt Amelia winced at this unkind allusion. Here was another element of discord. She was in constant dread lest her sister and Mr Winter should fall out; for Louis Winter was not a man to put up with the sort of contempt with which his sister-in-law regarded him, and would, if driven too far, break out into German oaths, after a fashion that Lady Danvers would never forgive.

'What am I to do?' she asked, with

a helpless casting up of her eyes. 'Sophia is not happy, neither am I.'

'I will consider,' said Lady Danvers, giving her a kindly glance. She had a mingled feeling of contempt and affection for this amiable but weak vessel. From her sister her eyes glanced round the room, and rested complacently on the glow a frosty sunset diffused over the yellow hangings, the tables piled up with Sevres and Nankin china, Hindoo idols and Japanese figures, carvings and bronzes, antique cabinets filled with coins, spindle-legged consoles ranged against the walls, and smaller ornaments. The pictures behind, standing forth in a blaze of light—St Sebastian prominent in a ruddy haze,—a portrait, said to be by Rembrandt, of a golden brown,—and Dutch landscapes, with luminous points upon tree and stream, calling up an ideal world of warmth and summer, to which the soft, penetrating odour of rose-leaves, in large blue and white pots, came as a fitting atmosphere.

'You seem very comfortable here,' was her remark, as her eye ranged round. 'Really cosy and comfortable. I only hope it will last.'

A sigh was the reply.

Then with a kind of heavy movement, natural to her tall figure, Lady Danvers rose and wandered round the room.

‘I wonder where all these beautiful things come from,’ she observed, examining the miniatures, snuff-boxes, and artistic treasures, opening and shutting illustrated volumes in gaudy bindings, and passing her long fingers over the surface of cups and vases. ‘Sent, I suppose, for sale; but what advantage can it be to have them? I wonder they trust him.’

‘My husband’s knowledge,’ replied Aunt Amelia, annoyed at the little consideration Lady Danvers showed for her feelings in alluding to Mr Winter, ‘gives value to art. The very fact that Louis has had these things in his possession, enhances their price.’

‘Humph!’ was Lady Danvers’ blunt rejoinder; ‘I hope they will go back safe.’ And here the conversation dropped, as, putting down her glass, she transferred herself to an arm-chair, which she filled with a kind of lofty indifference to Mr Winter and his doings.

With the ruddy sunset glow still on her face, she looked what she was—a mature beauty, with a dignity of form and outline largely proportioned that defies the trivial loss of youth and freshness. Like a choice peach left hanging on the wall, time had as yet but given a ripeness to her charms, a grave authority to her manners. No one, however bold, would have taken a liberty with Lady Danvers. The quiet determination of her large grey eyes, the haughty carriage of her head, her broad smooth brow, the clear metallic intonation of her voice, her accurate choice of words, and the judicial decision with which she dispensed her opinions on all subjects, repelled familiarity. So thought such single men as had ventured to propose to her.

She never would marry again, was her short answer; and be it said in passing, he would have been a bold man who braved the chance of a second refusal, — the ‘never would marry’ being spoken in such a decided way.

Perhaps she knew best, for she had been but the slave of a man who neither

loved nor understood her, and had crushed all her finer and more womanly feelings. Now that she was free, she prized that freedom as only a woman can who has suffered for years the mortification of suppression and neglect.

‘What a pleasure to have you with me, sister,’ said Aunt Amelia, as she was arranging Lady Danvers’ wraps. And here it must be noted that Mrs Winter always called Lady Danvers ‘sister.’ Never, since they parted as girls, had she addressed her by her Christian name. What her Christian name was would have remained a mystery, had she not signed it at length on all occasions in a large firm hand, — ‘Catherine Danvers.’

‘I can see, Amelia,’ said she, pressing Mr Winter’s hand in thanks, with another gracious smile, ‘that you are nervous. You have found Sophia too much for you. You won’t own it,’ she added, seeing her sister’s eager look of denial, — ‘cords would not draw it from you, but I understand.’

‘I wish Sophia would love me,’ Aunt Amelia answered, with a sigh; ‘it would make everything easier.’

‘She is an ungrateful girl if she does not,’ was the rejoinder.

‘I have looked forward to Jane’s coming,—Jane is so sweet-tempered, so easy.’

‘She is kept well under control,’ replied Lady Danvers. ‘I allow her to show no temper.’

‘But Sophia is a woman, sister, and a very lovely one, and she knows it. You cannot put Sophia on a par with an unformed girl like Jane.’

‘All unmarried girls are under control,’ retorted Lady Danvers. ‘You are not the person to manage her.’

‘I am afraid I am not,’ was the reply, and again she sighed. ‘I wish she would marry.’

‘Is there any chance of it?’ asked Lady Danvers, in her abrupt way.

‘I think so,’ answered Mrs Winter, rather dreading her sister’s inquisitorial investigations. ‘Louis’s nephew, John Bauer, admires her.’

‘A merchant in the City, is he not?’

‘Yes, sister, but immensely rich.’

‘What does Sophia say?’

‘Hates him, I fear, because she thinks I encourage him.’

‘A fine state of things, indeed!’ remarked Lady Danvers, rising to leave the room, closely followed by her sister, laden with her shawls. ‘Sophia must be an idiot to give herself these airs. Now, to revert to another subject before I go upstairs. You must understand, Amelia, that your husband must not imagine that because I am come to visit *you*—’ Here she paused, for Mrs Winter, knowing what was coming, cast at her a look so beseeching that Lady Danvers seemed at a loss in what manner to finish her sentence. ‘You must positively understand,’ she began again, ‘that Mr Winter must not deceive himself as to my resolution in regard to money. Tell him from me to avoid all transactions with *friends*,’—Lady Danvers emphasised the words; ‘they have ruined him. He is no relation of mine (I have enough of them, God knows!); but, for your sake, I have assisted him many times with loans, which he has never repaid. I have supported you, dear Amelia, when he could not.’ As she said this, her sister’s slight figure seemed to shrink. ‘Do not misunderstand me; my purse is at your service whenever *you* need it—’

‘Ah, sister!’ exclaimed Aunt Amelia, in a sort of moan.

‘But for Louis Winter I can do no more. If he again falls into difficulties, he must take the consequences.’ Aunt Amelia’s head fell upon her bosom, her hands dropped to her side. ‘Let us hope he may grow wiser as he grows older,’ added Lady Danvers.

How could she say that? She knew he would always remain what he was—a child in judgment, and live as he had lived—upon chance; a cheerful, self-deceiving *dilettante*, beloved and dreaded alike by all with whom he had dealings.

Thus a painful conversation ended. Mrs Winter, quite cowed into silence by the many allusions and suggestions of her sister, having conducted her to her room, returned to the drawing-room and the solitude of her bee-hive chair, reminding herself incessantly how charmed she was to have her with her; nevertheless, strangely thankful to have a few moments’ rest, to think quietly out the best way to avoid the various difficulties which Lady Danvers’ conversation had evoked.



CHAPTER X.



MEANWHILE, the two girls had been talking upstairs.

‘I am sorry my room is so dark,’ Sophia had said; ‘and no fire! But nobody thinks of me; I am in the way, and this is how they show it. But, do sit down, Jane, unless you are too cold.’

‘Oh, what a beautiful view there is from the window!’ cried Jane, looking out in the gathering twilight. ‘What a lovely place that is over there,—and those old trees!’ Then, without waiting for an answer,—‘Why, that must be the Thames! Oh, how delightful! there are actually swans among the rushes at the edge; and there is a boat, and an old gentleman in it, on a chair, fishing. Now the swans are after him; they will gobble him! Oh,

what fun! How I wish Aunt Amelia lived by the bank.' Then, turning round, her face all glowing, 'I would rather have this room, Sophia, than any in the house.'

'You are very easily pleased,' was the answer. The tone of her voice reminded Jane of her desire to fathom the cause of her melancholy. She turned reluctantly from the window and sat down. 'I thought you were so happy at Twickenham. Mamma said Aunt Amelia loved you like her own child.'

'No, no!' cried Sophia, with sudden vehemence; 'it is not true. Aunt Amelia is a hypocrite. I am my father's child—'

'But, Sophia, why should she have taken you to live with her? She was not obliged.'

'There were reasons, Jane. You don't understand. She was obliged. My dear father selected her before his death, and the family thought it best, as she had no children. In reality, she hates me. I am very miserable. Since I came, she invites no one to the house, not even her nearest neighbours and friends, with whom she almost lived before. It is insupportably dull!' with a sigh. 'I believe she does it out of spite to me,' and a flush—a

flush of anger—dyed her cheeks, as she remembered how this had shut her out from all chance of seeing Maitland. ‘Shall you be ashamed of me, Jane, like my aunt?’

‘Ashamed of you, dear?’ responded Jane, amazed at such a notion. ‘Are you not my cousin? Sophia,’ continued Jane, leaning back in her chair, ‘I should run away if I were not happy. Not now, in the cold, but by-and-by, when it is summer. It is lovely in the woods.’

‘So I would, if I had anywhere to go.’

‘But does no one want you, Sophia? I thought all grown-up girls had lovers. All the books I have read say so. I should look about until I found one. He will be sure to come just at the right minute—as Delville did to Cecilia. Did you ever read Cecilia? Delville came just in time; she was at the Blue Posts Inn going mad, you know.’

‘What is Cecilia to me?’ answered Sophia. ‘Don’t talk nonsense, child. Aunt Amelia wants to force me to marry; she has found me what you call a lover.’

‘Oh, how charming! Tell me all about it,’ and Jane rubbed her hands, and listened

with eyes and ears. This surely would solve the question as to what made Sophia so sad.

‘I will not speak of him; you must not ask me. He is too horrid,—a German! I would rather die than marry a man she chooses! Yes,’ she continued, seeing the look of astonishment on Jane’s mobile face, ‘I would rather die!’

As she spoke, her eyes flashed, at which Jane drew back, startled at her violence.

‘But is there no one else, Sophia?’ she inquired, with the persistency of conviction that there must be someone. ‘Do tell me.’

Sophia’s eyes fell before her scrutinising gaze. She sighed; then looked up with such an expression of profound suffering, that Jane called out in horror,—

‘I am sure he is dead.’

‘No! not dead,’ Sophia answered; ‘but gone, gone away. He does not care for me. Ah! if you could only see him, with his fair face so full of power, and such earnest eyes. I never saw a man like him.’

Then turning off abruptly, as she read the intense curiosity in Jane’s face.

‘Ask me no more questions, or—or—’ a convulsive sob stopped her.

‘Dear Sophia, I wish I could help you,’ responded Jane, pressing her hands.

There was a pause; then Sophia spoke again.

‘There is something about you, little cousin, that pleases me. I wish I were always with you. Kiss me, and tell me you love me. I want love.’

In a moment Jane’s arms were round her neck,—her fresh lips pressed to hers.

‘Never fear, Sophia, I will stand by you through thick and thin. I never met with anyone like you;’ and she passed her hands in wondering admiration over the rippling bands of raven hair that crowned Sophia’s head.

‘Listen to me, child,’ she continued, leaning back in her chair, Jane’s round eyes riveted upon her. ‘I was born under a hotter sun than you. I was reared in a fiery Indian climate, which makes fiercer natures than cold leaden land. All my life I was my father’s idol; he piled his riches upon me,—he loaded me with his love. Then the day came when he died,—ruined—and I was left alone with my nurse, Zebula,

and an old Indian, my bearer. Everyone loathed us, because they said they had confided their money to my father, and with his death, had lost all. Oh, it was horrible! They crowded round us,' and Sophia put her hands before her eyes to shut out the hideous image; 'old and young, the natives, and they would not believe but that I had treasure hid in the house. I threw open all the doors,—I entreated them to satisfy themselves. I lifted up my hands and told them I had nothing. They would not believe me, but stood round, scowling and chattering like wild beasts. They would have murdered me, but for the old negro bearer, who persuaded them for that day to go away. Had we not fled, they would have returned, stabbed us, and ransacked the house. Oh God! I see it now! Zebula and I stealing out in the night. There were merciful people who helped us to get a palanquin—but secretly, or they, too, would have been in danger. At last we reached Calcutta,—there we found friends. Until news came from England, I knew not what would become of me. Then I got letters to say it was decided I was to go to my Aunt Winter. Zebula and I

clung to each other as if our hearts would break. When the time came for us to part, she ran down to the quay before I embarked, and barred the way. She grovelled on the ground, she tore her hair. At that last moment the faithful creature told me, that if I ever wanted to return, she would spend her life in working for me. If I did *not* return,' Sophia's voice sounded so hollow in the darkness, that Jane grew cold, and shivered, 'she would do as she bid me do,—die. Then she gave me this,' and Sophia drew a delicately-worked filigree bottle from her bosom, then immediately replaced it. 'You understand? It is snake's poison, taken by the Indians, swift and strong. They use it in their weapons,—one drop is enough.' Then suddenly changing her tone, as she marked the absolute terror depicted on Jane's face, and giving a strange laugh as she drew her closer to her. 'So you see, little cousin, I need not run away to avoid marrying anyone I do not like. No one can force me. I am as free as air.'

But no echoing expression met hers. Jane's eyes were distended,—her cheeks very white.

‘How terrible!’ she said, in a suppressed voice; ‘you frighten me, Sophia—indeed you do! There is something awful about you! To think of your carrying about poison!’

It seemed so strange to her that death should walk hand-in-hand with life,—beauty with the grave. She pitied, she feared, she admired her cousin as a being out of another sphere. For some minutes not a word was uttered. Sophia was the first to break silence.

‘Jane,’ said she, ‘never breathe what I have told you to any human being. Promise!’

‘I do promise,’ answered the girl solemnly. ‘You have opened your heart to me, and I will keep your secret. I seem to have grown all at once into a woman since I came into this room. But tell me,’ she asked, with irrepressible curiosity, ‘shall I see the German—Aunt Amelia’s nephew? Uncle Louis told me once about him. He plays the violoncello, and is immensely rich. If you were rich, Sophia, you could do what you please. And the other’—hesitating—‘the one you

love? Is he gone far away? Surely he will come back. No one could resist you, Sophia. Perhaps, if anyone told him how unhappy you are, he would rush in as Mr B. rushed in to Pamela, when his proud sister had shut her up.'

Sophia looked displeased.

'What a child you are! You are too inquisitive. I tell you he is gone. Is not that enough? But never, never betray me, or I will never speak to you again! Now it is nearly dinner time, and we must dress. But tell me, before you go, do you think you can love me?' and a rare smile passed over Sophia's face, lighting up her brilliant eyes, her voice taking that soft cadence that answers to the minor key in music.

'Oh so dearly!' cried the ardent Jane, with many kisses, her arms entwined round Sophia's neck. 'I will serve you, Sophia, as faithfully'—(here she stopped in want of a suitable comparison, and, as her own experience afforded her none strong enough, she flew back to fiction),—'as faithfully as Aladdin served the lamp!'

As Sophia opened the door, a loud talking below announced the arrival of Uncle Louis. Not even the presence in the house of his dignified sister-in-law could silence his loud voice.

‘Dat von fool!’ he was shouting to Jacob. ‘I vill shoot you some day, dead, in der stomach, if zee not obey. Wer is der antik silber and der porze-lan sent down von London?’ and, with his spectacted eyes riveted on Jacob, he advanced step by step, as if to select the precise spot in his body at which to take aim.

‘Don’t ee! don’t ee!’ mumbled Jacob, hastily retreating into a doorway out of the line of Mr Winter’s bellicose attack. ‘Put away, sir,—put away, Mr Winter, in the closet, and the keys in missus’s pocket, under her dress. Be I to blame for that, sir? I must mind missus’ orders.

What Mr Winter would have answered, and how Aunt Amelia would have felt, never can be chronicled, for at that instant Jane’s light step was heard on the stairs, and she rushed down into his arms.



CHAPTER XI.

AT dinner time Uncle Louis appeared, arrayed in evening dress, with a frilled shirt, like the full breast of a pigeon,—trousers buttoned at the heels,—his hair brushed back wildly above his forehead, and his nose looking longer and redder than usual.

Before anyone was down, Jane, who was waiting for him in the hall, dragged him into the yellow drawing-room by main force.

‘Zee ’ave not forgot der old Oncle Louis!’ exclaimed he, casting up his eyes, in reply to the tight pressure of her hand. ‘How it can loofe already, die sweet maid!’

Uncle Louis was very ugly, but Jane did not perceive it. Youth bestows its

caresses blindly, inspired by the mind. It loves from within rather than from without, and innocently hangs over age and wrinkles almost repulsive, with fresh pure kisses coming from the soul, and leaving behind something of its celestial essence. Other kisses come later, that are given in a different mood; but youth's fervid offerings ask for no return.

Seated hand-in-hand on a sofa, they fell to talking of the life at Faulds, Uncle Louis inquiring after Nep, the great Newfoundland dog, Jane's constant companion in her solitary walks, and asking if he still laboured under a chronic antipathy for pigs, and always tried to throttle them? And the doves, which she kept in the orangery; and the guinea-pigs and rabbits in a corner of the kitchen garden; the dormice and the squirrels—all subjects of the liveliest interest to both.

'And ave zee zeen die Pagan gods lately?' asked Uncle Louis, with a wink, alluding to Jane's fanciful ideas about an illustrated edition of 'Ovid's Metamorphoses' (the text she was not allowed to read; she was most conscientious, and Lady Danvers could trust her). Un-

consciously she had become a Pantheist, and had brought herself to believe that the lazy Berkshire streams were haunted by water-nymphs and dryads, concealed among the flags,—that hairy satyrs swung themselves among the alders, and that a certain mossy hole in a gravel pit hard by a brook, overshadowed by snowy sheets of clematis, was the gate into the infernal regions, up which Proserpine came at pleasure to meet poor mother Cybele weeping among the ferns. Never did Jane pass that spot without a shudder; the swaying of a branch sent her flying, and the moan of the wind in the firs awoke mysterious fears.

‘And die Venus in die cloud, and Cupidon vid dee bow and arrows, in der laurel bower—ave he gomm to teach you loofe?’

Jane turned crimson, and said she was too old now for such nonsense. She could not think how she could ever have been so silly.

‘Silly!’ exclaimed Uncle Louis. ‘I call ees die pootrie of life. To create vat die fantaisie paint, dat is die gute sense. My littel Jane must nebber lose die schild-ish trust. It is zo sweet. It make

voman von angel. Der ees too moch of der Pozetif in dees world,' added he, drawing a profound sigh. 'Die great shoulds'—(thinking of himself and of his many ingenious and elaborate plans for making money,—specially the *grand coup* lost by what he considered the most trivial of all obstacles—the want of funds)—'leefe in die Ideal.'

This was all Greek to Jane, who gave him a saucy answer, pinched his cheek and called him a dear old boy ;—then with eager eyes inquired what he meant to do to celebrate Christmas.

'I have not come so far to spend a dull day, remember.'

'Nor schall zee!' cried Uncle Louis, chuckling with delight. 'Do zee tink der old oheim von infernal ninny to ask zee to Scatlands, and not to invent some funs?'

'Oh, tell me—tell me, Uncle Louis, what it is ;' and her eager eyes danced in her head.

But the arrival of Lady Danvers in a rustling silk dress with Mrs Winter, and of Sophia, who with a frigid air took her place near the door, interrupted the conversation. But so elated was Mr

Winter at the notion of the surprise in store for Jane, that he remained totally indifferent to the studied coldness of Lady Danvers,—his exuberant good humour spending itself in nods and winks at Jane, and all sorts of queer grimaces; he absolutely refusing to be classed as the criminal his sister-in-law considered him, for borrowing other people's money which he could not repay. When he offered his arm to lead his sister-in-law into dinner, his face was wreathed with smiles, and he gallantly placed her at the table beside him, with a low bow. On his left sat Jane, with whom he was still engaged in a course of surreptitious winks and squeezes which kept her in constant danger of an outburst of laughter. Then turning suddenly to Lady Danvers he filled her glass and touched it with his own.

‘Zee old haus ees honoured, my sister dat zee gomm. My pore Amalie rejoice in die noble guest. Zee want your courage, miladi. Ach Got! See vant dem mooch!’

Lady Danvers drew herself up.

‘I have not been tried, like Amelia,’ she replied, glancing at Mrs Winter, sitting silent at the head of the table, nervously

watching Jacob flourishing about the various dishes, handed in by a maid. Twice Lady Danvers had given him a stony stare, and gathered up the folds of her stiff dress, but with no avail; and Aunt Amelia knew too well that an inopportune remark might frighten him and bring about a catastrophe.

‘But die Amalie ave me,—my angel ave her Louis,’ replied Mr Winter, laying down his knife and fork and emphatically rapping the front of his shirt. ‘Amalie, my loofe, ees it not zo? am I not zur slave?’

At this appeal, his wife bowed her head meekly; but Lady Danvers was not to be appeased.

‘Perhaps it is possible my sister wants something more reliable. When you extol a gift, Mr Winter, it is well to appreciate its value.’

But the sarcasm of her words was thrown away on Mr Winter, and Amelia cast on her sister such an imploring glance that she said no more. Conscious of an unfriendly atmosphere, although unable to account for it, Uncle Louis turned to Jane, slipped a tender bit of chicken on her plate, and winked, pre-

tending to watch his wife opposite with awe.

‘Zee pore old boy who work zo hard in der dismal City to keep de roof upon der haus ’ave had no Christmas, no fest-tag till Jane gomm. Ve vill ave such romps, such surprises! Ah! schön! Such bootiful tings in store vor Jane.’

‘Do you really care to have me?’ she asked timidly.

‘Die schild! zee ask?’ and his grey eyes beamed under his shaggy eyebrows; at which Lady Danvers frowned and put up her glass. Dinner was part of the day’s ordinance,—a family function to be discussed with decorum. Jane was being made too prominent. She could not stop Mr Winter in his own house, but she could silence Jane, which she did with a look.

Sophia, sitting opposite, looked wonderfully handsome by candle-light, in her black silk dress, her eyes turned neither right nor left, but gazing into her plate. Even Jane’s radiant smiles directed across the table failed to rouse her, at which she felt a little hurt. Why was Sophia so different in her room? Of dissimulation, or the assuming of a part, Jane had

no conception,—her wildest imaginings had never attained to it. To tell an untruth she held to be a sin, but of the lighter and more artistic modes of deception, she knew nothing.

Now Sophia, in the strange contradiction of her nature, was acting a part in the presence of her new aunt. Although personally she was more than indifferent to her—for her distant manners had already inspired her with dislike—she desired her to understand how miserable Aunt Amelia made her. Not by reason of any settled scheme, but on the principle of the Athenians banishing Aristides, because they were tired of hearing him called ‘the Just,’ Sophia was tired of hearing Mrs Winter called an angel.

‘My dear,’ said Mrs Winter, with anxious kindness, seeing her empty plate, ‘you do not eat : I fear your dinner does not please you.’

Lady Danvers, without noticing Sophia, answered for her.

‘It is her own fault then ; the dinner is excellent. I do not know, Amelia, how you always manage to have such a good cook.’

‘Ess est my angel herself, bless zee!’ broke in Uncle Louis. ‘Dey gomm savage—zee tame zem.’

‘Why do you eat nothing?’ asked Lady Danvers abruptly, turning to Sophia.

‘I thank you,’ she replied coldly, ‘I have no appetite. Do not think of me. I am of no consequence.’

‘But I do think of you,’ replied Mrs Winter eagerly, from the top of the table.

‘And so do I tink of die Sophie, mooch, ver mooch,’ echoed Uncle Louis.

‘Please do not,’ said Sophia. ‘I can’t bear remarks; I shall go away if you notice me.’

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When they returned to the drawing-room, to the astonishment of everyone, except Uncle Louis, there stood John Bauer, with his back to the fire, blowing his nose. Hastily pocketing his handkerchief, he made a few steps forward; then stopped at the sight of the imposing figure of Lady Danvers on Mrs Winter’s arm.

‘Why, this is a pleasant surprise!’ exclaimed Aunt Amelia, advancing to take his hand; ‘how nice of you to come,

dear John! Why did you not join us at dinner?’

‘Did not Uncle Louis tell you he had asked me,’ inquired John, in a whisper. ‘We met in Cheapside, and he pressed me to come. You know, after my letter, I thought I might venture to take a look at her again, just a look, and go back.’ While he spoke, his eyes were seeking out Sophia, who had again seated herself near the door. ‘I did not know any visitors were here.’ And he shrank into the background of tables and consoles, as Lady Danvers advanced.

‘You never told me John Bauer was coming,’ said Mrs Winter to her husband.

‘Zo, zo, and vhy? Die schönen damen,’ looking round at his guests; ‘ave no one to amuse. Talk wid dem, mein sohn; or if die vords gomm not, bring out die instrument.’

This was not a style of address likely to assist a timid man like John, who coughed, and again had recourse to his handkerchief. Could he have guessed the effect his appearance made on Sophia, he certainly would have remained at home. The idea of this homely German supplanting Edward Maitland, raised a per-

fect tornado in her breast; and the little favour she had shown him on his first visit, in condescending to play for him, now turned into a jealous animosity. Did he think that because Aunt Amelia encouraged him, he was to force himself upon *her*?

‘Our nephew, sister,’ said Mrs Winter, presenting John Bauer; ‘Mr Winter’s sister’s son.’

‘I am glad to make your acquaintance,’ answered Lady Danvers graciously, extending two of her jewelled fingers, which were accepted by John as he would have touched something sacred; ‘I have often heard my sister speak of you with praise. Everyone who is kind to her stands well with me.’

Having made this gracious little speech, she settled herself in an arm-chair, drawing out her eyeglass to contemplate Louis Winter’s rich nephew at her ease.

‘Very unfair of my sister to call upon me for help, with a *millionaire* in the family,’ she was saying to herself.

‘I don’t think him so very ugly,—he has such a nice, good face,’ whispered Jane to Sophia; ‘but what a white man! Have all Germans straw-coloured hair

and eyebrows, and blue eyes? How nice it must be to have a real lover; I mean someone who loves you for yourself—not to make a match. And you have only been in England a month, and you have two! I suppose he will give you all kinds of presents. I should choose a horse and a lurcher. Nep is getting old. But your taste may be different.'

Meanwhile John Bauer, utterly abashed at finding himself the centre of observation, retreated into a corner behind Sophia's chair.

'Miss Escott,' he murmured, for the first time raising his eyes to hers, 'I hope you have not forgotten me?'

'No, Mr Bauer; I am not likely to do so: Mrs Winter takes care of that.'

What a strange look she gave him with those lustrous eyes! 'What did she mean?' thought John. 'Surely Aunt Amelia had not betrayed him!' and terrible doubts seized him.

'Is this Miss Danvers?' he asked, addressing her cousin seated near, feeling it incumbent on him to say something.

'Yes; I am Sophia's cousin,' answered Jane, eager to enter into conversation with this new specimen of the German

race. 'We came here to-day. I am so glad to be at Twickenham,—I am so fond of Uncle Louis!'

'Everyone is fond of him,' rejoined John, gaining a little more confidence, under Jane's friendly glances. 'Miss Escott too, I think, likes him.'

'He is the only person who makes my life bearable!' was her curt reply.

No wonder poor John found conversation difficult. No one cared to speak to him, and he wished he had not come. Aunt Amelia was conversing with her sister, and Mr Winter at that moment was handing her a cup of coffee out of the identical set of Dresden china his wife had so earnestly entreated him to send back.

'Beautiful; nicht wahr?' he was saying, pointing out the exquisitely-painted vignettes, surrounded by jewelled circles on cup and saucer. 'Beautiful and die old pâte. Noting like ee now. I had ee from a friend. He would look lovely at Faulds. Look! Johann,' fingering a cup with the tenderness of an amateur, as he turned from Lady Danvers, who had not vouchsafed a word, 'I had ee from

Gompertz, von great judge. Says Gompertz, "It is a chance vor a kings." "

'They are very fine,' answered John, thus appealed to; 'but quite unfit for common use.'

'I perfectly agree with you, Mr Bauer,' said Lady Danvers; 'and while I am here, I beg you will do me the favour, Mr Winter, not to produce them. They are treasures quite thrown away upon me. Another evening I shall ask for a cup of coffee out of Amelia's commonest set.'

Foiled in his attempt to tempt the 'old ooman,' as he called her, to purchase, Louis Winter, too good a general to accept defeat, pounded across the room in the direction of the two girls.

'Tune up! tune up!' he cried, 'die harmonie. Zee littel rogues,' to Jane; 'why zee never learn?' Now here is die Sophie. Let die new tante hear Sophie, and Johann and I will accompany.'

'Not I, Mr Winter,' interrupted John, quite loud; 'I said I never would play again in Miss Escott's presence, and I never will. Her wonderful talent must

at least exempt her from being sacrificed to me.'

'Zee est von fools,' whispered Uncle Louis, dragging him aside. 'Vy zee spoil sport? I ask zee here to pay die court to die Sophie, and zee says no von blessed word! Is it not enough to be froze alive by die old Danvers there, but zee must put in von tammed spoke dat die wheel not turn round?'

'Why will you not play?' Jane asked of Sophia, whose side she never left; 'I should like so much to hear you.'

'Not with him,' was Sophia's contemptuous answer, which she hardly cared to make low enough not to be heard.

'A very worthy young man, your nephew,' Lady Danvers was saying to her sister, 'and fairly good-looking. I remember his name now; but it was very wrong of you not to tell me Mr Winter had so rich a relative. How much has he a year?'

'Many thousands,' was the answer; 'but it has come gradually, of course. Now the business is increasing rapidly. By-and-by John will be a *millionaire*;

and he is so amiable and sympathetic. If I must tell you the truth, sister' (in a low voice), 'he has been very much struck with Sophia; he says he will wait to marry her for years.'

'For years! Why not at once? It is a perfect providence.'

'Yes, if she only would have him; but because she fancies I encourage him, she will hardly be civil. Poor fellow, it is very hard.'

'I never knew a young woman so amazing in my life,' said Lady Danvers, in her downright way. 'What does she want? I shall take an opportunity of telling her my mind. Ask him to come to-morrow, Amelia, to spend Christmas. Bring them together; little by little she will get accustomed to him.'

'I shall be very glad to have him,' was the answer. 'Louis has prepared a little *fête* for Jane. But what will Sophia say?'

'There you are again; giving in to that girl in everything! She will become a perfect tyrant!'

Aunt Amelia was too kind to say how much she was that already.

‘How wonderfully she has taken to Jane! I never saw her look so pleased. And what a sweet girl Jane is! so unconscious of her brilliant position,—nothing of the heiress about her! You will be marrying her soon. Dear little Jane!’

‘Not a word about her fortune, Amelia, I entreat you. She knows nothing about it. When the proper time comes for all those details, I shall tell her myself. I hope she will take it sensibly. To my mind, a woman who has money is rarely happy.’

As to her further projects for Jane, Lady Danvers made no allusion. Her world was not her sister’s, and the views which influenced her she would not understand. Aunt Amelia made no reply. To her, money was that one supreme good that answers to the sun in the natural world. What would her life not have been, had Louis had money?

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‘By the way,’ continued Lady Danvers, leaning back in the arm-chair, the bright fire lighting up the glazed tiles of the

grate into a cheerful glow, 'how is your ostentatious neighbour, Mrs Maitland?—as fat and fussy as ever? I suppose I must see her; but I tell you beforehand, I will not dine there. Her silver-plate, and that dreadful old husband, who looks as if he had worked in a mine, are really too much for me. The nearer you get to suburban London, the more mixed society becomes. No one would visit such a vulgarian in Berkshire.'

'You need not be afraid, sister; Mrs Maitland will not ask you. We do not meet now.'

'Not meet! How is that?' and Lady Danvers turned, in her deliberate way, and stared at her sister. 'Has Louis—Mr Winter—been borrowing money of her?'

'No, sister,' answered Mrs Winter, an indignant flush spreading over her face,— 'no; dear Louis has borrowed no money that I know of from anyone, least of all from the Maitlands. But it is about her son; she is afraid he may take a fancy to Sophia. When she was rich, Mrs Maitland could talk of nothing but her, and almost told me how much she'd like the match. I have felt her conduct very

much,' added Aunt Amelia, with a sigh. 'She is an old friend.'

'Afraid of Sophia!' ejaculated Lady Danvers, astonished at the kind of havoc this orphan niece seemed working in all around. 'Well, that is most surprising! I see nothing in Sophia so wonderful. A striking-looking girl certainly, and undoubtedly handsome, but with most unbecoming manners. I cannot make it out. You seem to fancy Mr Winter's nephew is in love with her, and now you speak of young Maitland.'

'Oh, I do not mean that Edward Maitland is in love with her, sister,' and a vivid recollection of that message she had to deliver in the morning to Sophia, and the certainty of reproaches, chilled her all over. 'As she has no money now, his mother is afraid her beauty might attract him.'

At this Lady Danvers tossed her head.

'Mrs Maitland seems to have formed an exaggerated idea of the pretensions of her son. Vulgar woman! She might be too thankful to have our niece for a daughter, under any circumstances.'

'That is not her view. Edward is to

make a great match, go into Parliament, and found a family. If Sophia had arrived with a great fortune, she would have accepted her ; not else.'

'All this seems a most prodigious fuss about nothing,' was Lady Danvers' remark.

'If no one vill play,' cried Uncle Louis, in a strident voice from the piano, where he was occupying himself in taking his silver flute out of its case, 'the old woman and I must tune up. Gomm, my Amalie,' crossing the room to offer her his arm.

Tears stood in her eyes at this little attention. It was so long since he had noticed her. Rising with alacrity she stood beside him, while he carefully rubbed the silver mountings with that eternal red handkerchief of his, ever in some way flourishing about him like a banner. Then she sat down, and passed her hands quietly over the keys, like the practised musician she was. Once started, the two instruments seemed to speak, the manifold tones of the piano supporting and subduing the sweet acuteness of the flute, and leading the melody as with the modulations of the human voice passionately pleading.

How beautiful it was ! Now one took up the theme, now the other, then joined for a moment in a union of harmonious sounds. It was Beethoven's 'Adelaide' they had chosen, that divine song breathing the very ecstasy of passion—passion strong as death, mighty as the whirlwind, yet all subdued and purified to gentlest uses, touching the soul by its fervour rather than by its strength.

It could not be said that Aunt Amelia played with the fire and brilliancy of the impetuous Sophia, but she had her own gentle way of dealing with the notes,—a subtle, subdued touch that conveyed a latent sentiment to be drawn upon indefinitely. When Uncle Louis took up the voice part, her eyes were fixed on him, and her hands alone followed him mechanically, as with rare skill he made his somewhat feeble instrument interpret every change in the utterance of the despairing lover, calling upon the clouds, the mountains, the flowers, streams, and springs,—all the hidden treasures of earth, and riches of summer in its grandest mood,—the mighty ocean itself, in its thundering roll,—every season and element—with the loved syllables of the name of 'Adelaide.'

Everyone was touched, including Aunt Amelia, who softly pressed her lips upon her husband's hand, as he put down his flute and passed his handkerchief over his moist brow. Jane clapped her hands, and flew upon him in an ecstasy of delight; and Lady Danvers rose from her chair and kissed her sister.

'You have forgotten nothing, dear Amelia,' she said, quite warmly. 'Indeed, you play better than ever, I think—with more expression.'

Even Sophia forgot her wrongs so far as to come forward and, in a moment of artistic expansion, remark that it must have been from Mrs Winter she inherited her love of music. And John Bauer, after rolling in his chair in a kind of musical rapture, indulged his feelings by shaking hands with both Mr and Mrs Winter, and again declaring that nothing should ever induce him to play before them again.

Everyone laughed, for John Bauer spoke with such earnestness, and seemed so angry with himself; and there was another laugh when Uncle Louis, addressing his wife as his '*theueres fraulein*,' formally offered her his arm, and led

her back, blushing like a girl, to her seat beside her sister.

It was wonderful how Adelaide had broken the ice and harmonised the party,—toning down into a momentary calm those conflicting elements of which it was composed—so much so that when Jacob entered, labouring under the weight of a heavy supper tray, laden with wine, beer, and spirits, assuming as he crossed the room, a perilously perpendicular direction, which Mrs Winter at once rushed to equalise, murmuring some words into his ear, which he answered out loud by saying,—‘As it’s maister’s orders—don’t blame me, ma’am. “Don’t forget the beer,” says master. “I and my neffy is Germans, and we allus drinks beer.”’ Every one began to laugh.

John Bauer actually overcome his shyness so much as to pour out a glass of sherry for Sophia, which, wonderful to relate, she accepted; Uncle Louis helping Lady Danvers and his wife and Jane out of a china jug full of hot negus.

‘I shall dream of Adelaide,’ whispered Jane to Sophia, carefully sipping the boiling negus. ‘I am sure I must have seen her in the laurel grove at Faulds, dressed like

Calypso, in the corner where the violets grow.'

'Nonsense!' returned Sophia, in the same tone. 'I am an only child, too, but am sure I never talked such nonsense.'

'What nonsense about a lover, Sophia, when you have two!' Which speech made Sophia frown, especially as John Bauer, whose prominent blue eyes never left her, encouraged by her unwonted graciousness, pressed upon her a second glass of sherry, which she so sternly refused, that he retreated crest-fallen to the hall, where, suddenly remembering what was due to Aunt Amelia, he put in his head to bid good-night, adding,—

'You have asked me for to-morrow, aunt, and I mean to come. A Christmas Day alone at North End is too much for me. I should certainly be starved.'

'Quite right, Mr Bauer; quite right,' was heard in the clear, high voice of Lady Danvers. 'We shall be glad to see you.'

'My dear fellow—of course—' from Mrs Winter. What Uncle Louis would have said, was lost in a fit of coughing, occasioned by the haste with which he had imbibed a glass of beer. '*Mein sohn,*

mein sohn—' was all he could utter, followed by inaudible sounds out of the red handkerchief.

So that what had threatened to be a dull evening to all but the ardent spirit of Jane, turned out most cheerfully, thanks to the charm exercised by the great magician Beethoven.





CHAPTER XII.

WHEN that dear little maid, Jane Danvers, retired to bed under the scantiest of dimity curtains, and a slip of carpet like an island in an ocean of deal floor, she could not go to sleep for thinking of Sophia. In her girlish, one-sided sympathy—so sweet, yet so deceptive—Jane forgot what everyone knew, that except an angel, or a sister of mercy, no one ever was so good and kind as Aunt Amelia; and that she should voluntarily have received an orphan niece into her house and treated her badly, was an impossibility ridiculous to contemplate.

But fresh from the influence of Sophia's morbid conviction, that she was the

most ill-used of mortals, Jane, a rush of young blood pouring through her veins, then and there resolved to espouse her cause, and rescue her from persecution.

‘I swear it!’ she cried aloud, out of the bed-clothes, clenching her soft little hands together, as if to say her prayers. ‘I will never forsake her!’

How could a girl like Jane understand that it was not in the least Aunt Amelia who had angered Sophia, but the social system she represented of English life?—that any species of authority was odious to her, and that the idea of marrying a man who she imagined would continue this system of repression, under the direction of Aunt Amelia, wrought her up into a perfect rage of opposition. How could inexperienced Jane understand all this? at that happy age when the judgment has not yet ripened to keep pace with the intelligence. She saw her beautiful, and believed her wronged. This was enough to evoke the latent Quixotism of her nature. To Jane she was the desolate, abandoned one,—Ariadne, Dido, Andromeda, all in one.

As she lay thinking over all this, a

bright idea struck her. How delightful it would be if Sophia could come and live with her at Faulds. Lady Danvers was her aunt as well as Mrs Winter, and if her lovers cared for her (Jane was too much interested in the lovers to forget them), they might come there also, as they always did in books. A slight misgiving did occur to her as she thought of what her mother would say, but that was at once over-ruled by her conviction of the manifold fascinations of Sophia.

‘How delightful to have her always with me!’ was her thought. ‘I want a companion,—I have no one but the dog. She shall teach in the Sunday school,—the biggest boys; they will mind her. We will go and visit the gipsies in the Red Lane, and I will introduce her to the duchess. If the duchess likes her, mamma will be sure to approve. Then rose up an image in Jane’s busy brain of wanderings together through the leafy avenues of the park,—Sophia, pale and tall like the chaste Una,—Nep at her side to personate the lion;—of sitting in the octagon parlour where the antique collections of centuries were ranged, and looking out on the terraces from the Elizabethan porch, over which

were carved in stone Prince of Wales' feathers ;—of loitering in shady nooks by lazy Berkshire streams, buried in withyes and alders, the moss-grown banks covered by tall plants of willow herb, and watching the passing shadows of the clouds among the blue fir-woods, under which lurked rabbits and field-mice, giving infinite sport. Hitherto Jane had lived alone with Nature ; she had caught a wild charm from its freshness,—a radiance from its bloom. Her out-door life had painted her cheeks with the colour of the rose, given a gloss to the curls of her brown hair,—an elastic freedom to her movements, more befitting a wood-nymph than a modern young lady. But of this solitude she had had enough. When at last she closed her eyes in sleep, dreams came to her of Sophia, a lovely apparition, before whom the choicest flowers blossomed, the lofty oaks bent low, the dark hollies rattled their prickly leaves, and the birds sang in chorus,—Sophia, supreme as the spirit of the earth, wandering in mazes of beauty, and she herself following as her humblest and most devoted slave.

While Jane slumbered peacefully, cradled

in happy dreams, a very different scene was passing in the room of the object of her thoughts.

Poor Sophia, once removed out of the scrutiny of Lady Danvers' all-seeing eyes, alone in the bareness of her slenderly lighted room, was standing beside the window overlooking Rosebank, her hands clasped together, the veriest picture of despair.

Not till that moment of silence and solitude (the clock in the Gothic tower of Rosebank had long struck twelve) did she realise what the departure of Edward really meant. Until now, although she did not see him, he was near. A nameless excitement supported her through the days. At any hour he might come; at any moment she might hear of him, or some word might drop that would reveal him to her in a new light, or give a clue to his motives and actions. Like life to the sick, while Edward was at hand, there was hope; and in his absence death,—death as cold and chill as the frosty distance on those broad lawns and river-terraced walks under the deceptive glitter of the wintry night.

And he was gone, without a word! His callous abandonment bowed her to the

earth. 'A friend' he had called himself—a lover she had thought. Alas, he was neither! That sunny face of his, made to inspire faith, was but a mask; those fervid glances which seemed to radiate happiness—a fraud! Was it for this she had unlocked the secrets of her heart?—told him her life?—described her feelings? To him—a stranger?

A burning blush rose to her cheeks as she recalled how she had melted under the charm of those deep-set eyes. Love her? Fool that she was! No one would ever love her! Devils at her birth must have cursed her. Zebula had told her such things were. After all, why should he care for her? What had she to offer? Her life was done,—the world as dark as when she landed from India. No one should know it. But she would die,—and she pressed her hand against her breast to assure herself that the power lay there hidden from all eyes.

A moment of rage stirred her bosom at the injustice of the world; then tears rose in her eyes and washed out the feeling. Why did fools talk to her of her beauty if she could charm no one? She was young, she felt, to break her

heart ; but so it was. No one could comfort her.

As her eyes strained themselves to look out on the world which was fading from her gaze, the soft radiance of the starlight was gloomed by sudden clouds—darkness spread over the front of the house at Rosebank—the outlines of the woods took strange shapes,—the night mist wreathed into the outline of spectral forms,—and the low moan of the night wind sounded hollow in her ears.

Cold and shivering, she turned from the window to the dressing-table, on which stood a lighted candle beside an oval mirror in an elaborate ebony frame, which Aunt Amelia had impounded from the artistic furniture below. On the table lay a letter, carefully sealed, and addressed to ‘Miss Escott, Scatlands.’

She eagerly seized it, under the impression that it came from Zebula. But she could see no Indian postmark, nor indeed any mark at all. As in all her life, Sophia had never received more than one or two letters, the arrival of this one filled her with alarm. She turned it over, considered the paper, examined the seal, then put it down, and studied the bold, large letters of the address.

All at once it occurred to her that it would be as well to open it. She broke the seal, and with eager eyes read as follows:—

‘ You flatter yourself that Mr Maitland loves you. It is not so. He is only amusing himself. Your forward conduct has so disgusted him that he has left home to avoid you. It is useless for you to follow him ; he is about to marry a lady to whom he has been long attached. The violent efforts you have made to secure him have only hastened this event. He is perfectly aware of your engagement to Mr Bauer, and despises you as a *coquette* and an *intriguer*. The writer, who watches you and your doings, advises you to marry your rich lover as soon as decency permits, lest he too may find you out and turn his back upon you.

‘ ONE WHO KNOWS.’

As Sophia’s eyes passed up and down the lines, scanning them again and again, until the characters seemed stamped on her brain, an ashy whiteness overspread her face,—she clutched the back of a chair

near her, or she would have fallen. Her head reeled,—every sense seemed paralysed.

Thus she sat for some minutes, the letter open on her lap. If she had fainted, she never knew; a dull vacuum took possession of her, as if all the functions of life were suspended; then her pulses beat wildly, the blood came rushing back to her heart, her temples seemed to burn. For a few moments memory wavered; then with a crushing force of consciousness, her whole life since she came to England stood out before her. The big yellow coach in the highroad,—the tall figure of Maitland rising out of the mist,—their walk together along the lane,—the tones of his voice so full of comfort,—the gaunt aspect of Scatlands, and the green park into which he turned,—his sudden appearance in the yellow drawing-room,—the scent of the dried rose-leaves,—the music,—his grave, steadfast eyes, melting into an infinite sweetness,—the last longing look he cast on her as he stood in the doorway,—the sound of his departing footsteps in the hall, her wild impulse to follow him and clasp him in her arms,—all passed before her with the vividness

of life. Then her dull eyes turned on the open letter, and, with a sob that shook her whole frame and left her powerless as an infant, she flung herself upon the bed.





CHAPTER XIII.



REAL Christmas day ;— the ground bound with an iron frost, and sprinkled with a thick layer of snow, — the branches of the trees like lacework against an ashy sky, every branch and twig glorified, as it were, with countless sparkling crystals,—the air keen and quiet, without a breath of wind,—the sun shining brightly out of a bank of red clouds, and giving a touch of colour to the death-like greys and azures of the veiled distance.

How sombre it all looked !—the familiar lines of wall along the lane, so petrified and cruel !—the edging of laurels hanging over it, drooping with crusty masses of snow !—the elm-boles, like gloomy pillars, upholding the canopy of sky,—the road an

unbroken expanse of whiteness, on which some dark footprints showed up in black outlines! What an ugly little world, silent and mournful—the death-bed of nature, lying wrapped in its pall!—The old year dying out, white and cold, on its bier of snow, the new one to be born again out of the dark sods, in tiny baby buds clinging tremblingly to the soil, brown spiky leaves piercing the icy mould,—and bursting seeds: the battle of the old and new seasons with nature, weak and sickly as yet, against the grasp of death.

Christmas indeed—a day of rejoicing! Nothing looked like it. The earth had folded itself up as in an iron frame, and even the boisterous wind had gone to rest. No bird or insect was present to give its note of praise. The rooks on the tall elms were silent,—the sparrows chirped no more,—the owls forgot to hoot, they were so cold,—and even the robins, nestled in their deep shroud of dry leaves, dumb waiting until the light came freer, and the sun rose higher over the desolate waste of the white world.

Christmas! One needs to be as young and fresh as the new year to welcome these anniversaries as life goes on;—not

only ushered in by the chills of winter, and the frown of unfriendly skies, but accompanied too often by sad memories linking year by year in the dull chain of life,—the empty places where death has passed,—the absence of loved ones, never to return. Every grief, every pain, like open wounds bleeding afresh,—the fear of ills to come,—the heavy hand of care,—the havoc time has wrought in faces that once were fair,—whole families vanished,—the fervour of flashing eyes dimmed,—the warmth of hotly-pressed fingers chilled. The dead rising up between us and the living, and speaking in spirit voices.—‘What matter? Earth is but a grave. Upon the brink you stand, catching at shadows. Soon you too will fall headlong and be seen no more.’

But no such mournful fancies troubled Jane, waking up with the buoyance of a young lark to an unmistakable power of enjoyment—indicated in the corners of her smiling lips, the rise of her eyebrows, the crispness of her curls, the restlessness of her feet,—as, with a little shiver, she jumped out of bed to gaze through the frozen window-panes; her whole soul in

such a tumult of delighted anticipation, that not even the dreary outlook could chill it.

Meanwhile she must dress—a prosaic necessity forced upon her by the cold, although it was entrancing to watch a group of boys, blowing on their fingers as they proceeded, Indian file, through the snow,—to see the muffin man, wrapped in an old sack, sounding his bell, and the postman, with heavy bags, ringing at closed doors,—to listen to the church-bells carolling gaily out of the mist, and now and then a pop-gun exploding with an imposing bang.

Jane was soon ready; then, with a jump or two, out of sheer lightness of heart, she ran downstairs into the hall.

‘Komm, my littel Jane, my *camarade*!’ called out Uncle Louis, in his deep bass voice, from the depths of a distant passage. ‘Put on de hat, and ve vill zee die skating bevor breakfast.’

Quick as thought Jane ran back, rammed her hat on her head, her arms into her cloak, and was downstairs again before Uncle Louis had muffled himself in a furred cloak reaching to his heels, and a cap resting on the bridge of his prominent nose.

Opposite the door of Scatlands lay a large pond, on which hundreds of boys clustered, and peals of laughter rang out as one got a tumble, and twenty others were precipitated on his back.

‘How I should like to slide!’ cried Jane, looking on with longing eyes.

‘Impossible!’ answered Uncle Louis, red as a lobster, seizing her by the arm. ‘Vot vud die Danvers zay?’

‘Oh! but I do at home; mamma always says I was meant for a boy. Oh, do! Just let me feel the ice.’

Before he could stop her, she had cast him off, flown to the brink, and taken a long slide, landing triumphantly on the other side, among a crowd of ill-looking boys, who crowded round her.

Never was Uncle Louis so nearly being in a passion in his life. Rushing after her on his short legs, he led her off by main force in an opposite direction.

‘Ave zee no shames, my schilds? Die old teufel Maitland, dat vatch like von spider all who pass,—and Gompertz, dat turn up at all corners. I vill go homes.’

Dragging the reluctant girl after him,

he took some steps towards the house, then, suddenly remembering it was Christmas Day, and giving one glance at her repentant face—where they had halted, her cheeks glowing like the red plumes in her hat; her restless feet moving in spite of herself—his heart melted, and he changed his mind!

‘Will my angels take von *leetle* slide bevor ve goes?’ he said, in a coaxing tone, drawing her to him, and kissing her.

‘No, no, Uncle Louis,’ was her answer, turning her back resolutely on the fascinations of the pond, and selecting a path all encrusted with snow, leading towards the Twickenham meadows, where the grass lay like a carpet of crystals under interlacing boughs, every branchlet and shoot of the lofty elms glorified,—to where the Thames spread out like a blanched highway into rosy distances against the sky.

Absolute solitude—except a dark figure—here and there stepping out noiselessly along the bank—of tidy countrymen in smock-frocks bound for church, and groups of ragged boys seeking among the bushes for half-starved birds; the mists beyond wreathed in confused masses.

At the locks the ice piled up in heaps, with sweet, smooth stretches between, as of diamonds following the river's curve; the frozen reeds bending and quivering mysteriously, under a chill breeze, as though touched by the fingers of an unseen hand.

Opposite, on the right bank, the venerable front of Ham House, with its deep porch and arcaded wings looking down a noble avenue of limes to a rustic landing-pier; the undulating park, dotted with ancestral trees, joining on to the long line of the Petersham fields and Richmond Hill; lower down, to the right, the wide façade of Orleans House, where Queen Anne lived with her only son, whose death exhausted all the little heart she had for her family. Further on, on the same side, the quaint outline of Strawberry Hill, heading a slight rise, the sham towers and turrets and oriel-windowed gables recalling the far-famed collection of the little Earl to Mr Winter's active mind.

Jane listened—delighted, to all he said about the pictures and armour, pottery and Raffaele ware, and the marketable value put on them by him. Surely

Uncle Louis was a very clever man. He knew everything, from china and glass to Hudson the painter, who taught Sir Joshua, and had lived near Pope's villa; Sir Godfrey Kneller and Mrs Pritchard the actress; the Duchess of Lauderdale, George II., and Bishop Warburton, who was buried in Twickenham Church.

No breath of wind stirred the air; the ozier beds and willows rose black and frozen out of a sea of snow; the toy-boats lay high and dry under the sparkling trees; the barges and coal-rafts blocked in by ice; and the red roofs of Richmond looming out bright in the distance beyond.

'Oh, how heavenly!' exclaimed Jane, dancing on in front, and interrupting Uncle Louis in his account of the Vandykes and the Lelys at Strawberry Hill. 'Did you ever see anything prettier? Oh, dear! I am perfectly longing for some fun! I wish Nep was here, he would have set all those boys flying.' Then pushing back the brown curls which fell about her face, she suddenly stopped under the shelter of a screen of hollies, and turned round,—

‘Tell me, Uncle Louis,’ she said, ‘why is Sophia always unhappy?’

‘Die Sophie?’ gasped Uncle Louis, pausing to collect his breath. ‘Zee fly like von birds, my schilds. Vell, vat can I say? Zee mourn die papa—zee have no golds. Gompertz, der rascal, zee take all mines. I plays die musik, but die Sophie zee sulks. Die tante and Sophie not get on at alls. But zee very fond of Uncle Louis! Poof!’ contemptuously, ‘Vat of dat? Zee vant der goote mans to loofe her. Dat ees die *maladie*. Johann would cover her vid bank notes.’ Then in a coaxing tone, ‘Incline her soul to der Johann, mein littel darlings; Johann vill bear her tempers like von rich angels as zee ees.’

‘Temper, Uncle Louis? Do you really think that anyone so lovely as Sophia can have a bad temper? When I first saw her, I was quite startled; except for her black hair, she seemed just like Venus.’

‘Vot I know?’ returned Uncle Louis, shrugging his broad shoulders. ‘I am in die City all day, making die pot boil for my old girls.’

This idea of ‘temper’ presented a new train of thought to Jane, who walked on for some minutes in silence.

‘Don’t tell anyone,’ she said, at last, ‘but before you called me out of the hall, I ran to Sophia’s door, and it was locked ; and when I begged her to let me in, she told me to go away. And she had kissed me the night before, and I could not sleep for thinking of her. Now should you call that temper, Uncle Louis, or is it her strange Indian ways?’

Again Uncle Louis suddenly became cautious, and raised those broad shoulders of his in reply.

‘Now, do you know, I was thinking, if you and Aunt Amelia did not mind, how nice it would be for Sophia to come and live with us at Faulds.’

‘Ask die tante, my schilds,’ replied Mr Winter cautiously, still feeling himself on delicate ground. ‘Zee ees her niece, not mine.’ A wink from his twinkling little eyes implied more than his words (a man who had baffled his Jewish compatriots and all the curiosity dealers of London, was not likely to be caught napping by a girl like Jane), and a sly pinch ended a conversation upon which Jane had counted as some guide in the important enterprise in which she had engaged.

Then her attention was artfully drawn

off by Mr Winter, who after much fumbling, drew from his pocket a paper carefully inscribed in printed letters, setting forth that 'The grand domestic entertainment was to commence by eating each other at four o'clock, the bones to be distributed to the survivors at five.'

Not another step did Jane take before collaring him by the fur cloak and assailing him with questions,—he silently chuckling the while, with that vein of natural cunning which made him at once the funniest and most unreliable of men.

Talking of 'the surprise' reminded Jane that she had had no breakfast;—a fact quite immaterial to Uncle Louis, who, unless under pressure of his wife, never took any regular meals at all, but ate where he stood when he felt hungry.

Now, the sudden paleness of Jane's cheeks and a check in her rapid progress, struck even his vague perception. He offered to return home; then suggested that as they were so near Mrs Joddrell's lollipop shop, they should go there.

'But I don't want lollipops,' cried Jane, laughing, 'only a bit of bread. It is so late, and we must meet mamma at church.'

A few minutes brought them into the straggling street, face to face with Mrs Joddrell, sitting in her little den, a Bible spread open before her. She looked very solemn when asked for bread, and muttered something about 'the Lord's day'; but the wan look on Jane's pretty face, and her better nature prevailing, she dived into the recesses of a dark cupboard and produced a loaf.

'If I was axed for lollies, I might have served 'em on Sunday for the Royal Princesses, bless their hearts! but never did I think to see a dear little lady on Christmas, of all the days, a-starving for bread, and the old Garman gentleman a-standing by like the wolf in Red Riding Hood a-waiting to spring.'

At this moment a loud peal of bells had the effect of turning Mrs Joddrell into stone. Without a word she took her latchkey from her pocket, and prepared to lock the door,—Mr Winter and Jane making their way down the slushy little street, among the usual groups of broken-down post-boys and red-faced ostlers, the country bumpkins in smock frocks, sheepishly following their better halves to church through the snow.

Uncle Louis, not at all in the habit of attending the services of any religious persuasion, and violently protesting against his wife's endeavours to make him accompany her, felt, as he entered, that every eye was upon him; Jane, as a stranger, also coming in for her due share of observation, as she seated herself in the Scatlands' pew, lined with green baize, beautifully printed prayer-books spread before her,—the walls around wreathed with holly and laurel.

They were delightfully early, Jane thought, as she studied party after party coming up the aisle.

The body of the church was filled to overflowing, and the boys in the western gallery whispered and cracked nuts; the chancel arch was broad and massive, the pillars had a low, slouching look; on either side of the painted window were gold discs with the commandments, and the altar cloth was worm-eaten and shabby.

'Dere is dat tamned old cat die Maitland,' Uncle Louis whispered, as that lady rustled in, in a pelisse of purple satin, and a white coal-scuttle chip bonnet and plumes, her hair elaborately frizzed, followed by her companion, deeply veiled,

and more nervous and startled - looking than ever, taking their place in a high gallery pew over the communion rails, before which Pope and his family lie interred.

The whole Shorne family followed, with the exception of Mrs Shorne, who had accompanied her husband into the vestry, to tie on his bands. Many nods and condemnatory glances exchanged between Mrs Maitland and Minnie Shorne in the direction of Jane's neat little figure, which they evidently mistook for Sophia. But a full view of her childish face, blooming cheeks, and home-bred air, as she turned her head to smile up at Mr Winter (not one moment still, and whispering to her unceasingly), dispelled this illusion.

Just as the organ burst forth in what to Jane seemed a flood of awful harmony, and the white-robed choir-boys rose to sing the hymn, the majestic form of Lady Danvers appeared in the porch, followed by Mrs Winter carrying her shawl.

With an aspect of the profoundest respect, Mr Winter rose, and stood aside to let them pass; then, while every head was turned to look at them, with that

peculiar agility which had so often stood him in good stead, he slipped out unperceived, and dashed down the churchyard.

What had peculiarly riled him was the tall gaunt figure of his compatriot, Gompertz, whom he knew to be still a Jew, turning over the leaves of a prayer-book with the utmost devotion.

‘Tamn him, does he tink he can deceive der Lord Jehovah,’ he muttered. ‘Zee vill fall downs dead like Ananias, der rascals, and be carried out.’

I fear Jane listened but little to Mr Shorne’s exhortations appropriate to the day. The Reverend John was red and sneezy, and the clerk diving up and down in his box like Punch, gave out the Psalms, dressed in blue cloth with brass buttons. Her curious eyes were fully occupied with the wealthy bankers’ and brewers’ wives, whose husbands had made fortunes, and settled in the *rus in urbe* of Twickenham.

As usual, there were a great many more women than men, but those who came made up for the want of numbers by the rich colours of their cravats and waistcoats, specially a little old French

refugee with a pigtail, who wore what was called a 'roquelaure' of deep claret colour, with boots and high heels, walking in on the tips of his toes; and some Bluecoat boys, without hats, making a great noise.

At the conclusion of a wearisome discourse on the descent of the tribe of Judah—which sent everyone to sleep—the Scatlands' party on going out found John Bauer stationed at the church door, holding in his hand a large nosegay, evidently intended for Sophia.

(He had given his Alsatian cook warning that morning, because in her haste to start on an expedition of her own, she had let the kettle boil over, and scalded the tailless cat).

Poor John did not appear to advantage on this occasion. He had a bad cold, which dulled his round blue eyes, vainly searching for Sophia among the crowd; and his look of utter dejection when he found she was not there was altogether so pitiable, that it touched the sensitive heart of Jane, who would have liked to tell him how sorry she felt, but, seized by a sudden access of shyness, found no suitable words.

Lady Danvers, who had expected a fly,

and was very much put out at having to walk back in the snow, maintained a stony silence, and the kind little chirrupings of Aunt Amelia, however well meant, were not sufficient to raise the spirits of the party.





CHAPTER XIV.

THERE was a large empty saloon at Scatlands no one ever used, down a long passage opening to the garden, which went by the name of the Dragon-room. A richly-gilt girandola hung from the ceiling, and there were antique sconces for clusters of candles all round. A quaint Chinese paper of sprawling monsters and huge red flowers covered the walls; a high wooden wainscot rose from the floor, and a mantelpiece covered with carved dragons and wreaths of flowers, surmounted a hearth with dogs.

Generally used as a repository for Mr Winter's boxes and cases of artistic consignments, it had been lately emptied, the polished oak floor swept, the windows opened, and the door locked. No

one was in the secret but Mr Winter and Jacob,—who, ever since he came, had been following him with the greatest appearance of mystery, in and out, carrying parcels and paper boxes without end.

‘The master be going to do summat splendacious,’ he whispered to the cook, who at once formed her own plans for seeing what was going on, but was always frustrated by the persistency with which Mr Winter pocketed the key.

Now three o’clock is at hand, and everybody waiting in the yellow drawing-room,—Uncle Louis, quite pale with excitement, going in and out, and speaking to no one,—Jane, her eager eyes fixed on the hands of the clock,—John Bauer, blowing his nose nervously, his anxious glances turned towards the door, and Aunt Amelia, greatly troubled in respect of the late dinner. Already she had detected an ominous thickness in Jacob’s speech, and a stolid familiarity in his manner which her reproving looks had failed to check. The cook, also, sulking at not being admitted to the closed room, had the day before intimated plainly that without help she should go ; and the little

housemaid, taken with what she called the 'flitters,' was found sitting sobbing on the stairs.

With all these domestic jars, and the continual orders and questions and scoldings of her husband, it was not wonderful that Aunt Amelia not only put aside all memory of Edward Maitland's message, but for the time forgot his very existence.

A dozen times, at least, Mr Winter had fidgeted in and out of the drawing-room, coming up every now and then to smooth Jane's hair and glare at her benevolently through his spectacles, then run off, flourishing his red handkerchief, calling loudly upon Jacob, replying in a stentorian voice out of what seemed interminable distances.

At the stroke of four, Jane felt herself tremble, and when Uncle Louis, with an air of immense mystery, offered her his arm, you might have heard her heart beat under her stays.

As the door of the Dragon-room was thrown open by Jacob, in a white tie,—the cook all smiles now, and the housemaid miraculously recovered; also, a dirty little boy, who blacked shoes and

ran on errands, known by the name of Cinders, ranged behind in the passage,—Jane could not believe her eyes. Every glimmer of day had been excluded. The flood of light from the central chandelier almost blinding,—the walls, lined with evergreens, presenting the appearance of a tropical garden, laden with oranges, pomegranates, and grapes, between sheets of winter flowers of every hue,—innumerable tapers twinkling in between, and gleaming on the dark varnish of the leaves; and bunches of red holly and white mistletoe ranged on trellises of ivy, crossed by gilt bars. In the large bay window a fernery lined with moss, and a mimic fountain, artfully lighted up with iridescent light, where, among silver fronds, shoals of gold fish floated.

In the centre of the room a table covered with what at first seemed a kaleidoscope of every shape and colour, but which gradually revealed itself as moulds of jelly and coloured creams inserted among piles of sugar-work cakes, tarts brilliant with tinted jams, dried fruits, sugar-plums of every hue, and candied chocolate of all forms,—in the middle, a tall young fir, frosted with sugar—the German

Christ-Baum—a novelty in those days—laden with coloured tapers and hundreds of little gifts, overhanging a tiny jet of scented water, which gurgled between flower-strewn borders of moss, on which toy swans were swimming in the most cheerful way.

Everything that could be placed on a dish was arranged in Uncle Louis's choicest specimen - china,—shepherds and shepherdesses, nymphs and satyrs, cupids and cherubs, bearing flowers in their uplifted arms,—bacchantes crowned for the vintage,—small gentlemen in *perukes* and long-tailed coats, flirting immoderately with diminutive ladies in mob caps,—boys in damascened waistcoats, engaged in impossible gymnastics,—a court lady unfolding her fan, her train held up by a blackamoor,—and Apollo and the Graces driving the chariot of the sun,—an ideal world of perpetual youth and never-ending smiles, in shades of the most delicate colour, among ruby *pokals* and jugs of lemonade and negus, placed beside Sevres plates of fabulous value, and Dresden baskets ;—the flowers on the wall, the branches of the chandelier, the wreaths festooning the cornice, the ferns, the Christmas-tree, hung with every

possible toy and present—all bearing the name of ‘Jane’ in endless devices.

At the top of the table Jane stood speechless ; then, with an unutterable burst of delight, threw her arms round Uncle Louis, and thanked him with a kiss.

A general burst of admiration broke from everyone. Even Lady Danvers was touched, and said,—‘ No one but an artist could have shown such taste.’

‘ Now, zee must all trink to Jane’s health,’ cried Uncle Louis, standing erect at the head of the table, with an air of old-fashioned solemnity. ‘ Johann, mein sohn, gif die “ Hip, ip, hurrah,” in good English style.’

‘ Yes, uncle,’ answered John, as if roused out of his sleep.

Then, turning to Aunt Amelia, Uncle Louis gave, as his second toast, ‘ My dearest self,’ at which there was a momentary pause, a faint chime of the afternoon church bells making themselves heard ; glass clinked merrily against glass ; every face smiled, and poor Aunt Amelia so overcome, she could only clasp her hands and look ineffably happy.

‘ But,’ cried Uncle Louis from the top of the table, looking round, ‘ ver is die

Sophie? Die Sophie must not tink zee lives not in my hearts.'

'I am here,' answered a strangely-sounding voice, as she advanced and took a vacant place between Uncle Louis and Jane,—who, with cheeks burning and dancing eyes, received her with an ecstatic clapping of her hands.

But this burst of innocent delight found no response in Sophia. Her manner was abrupt, her movements wanting in that measured grace which usually characterised them—her lips colourless, her large liquid eyes dull, and the hollows in her delicate cheeks showing but too plainly how the strain of suspense had told upon her. Castdown and hopeless, she was the ghost of herself.

'Tell me, dear,' whispered Jane, a little intimidated at the change, but overlooking it in her excitement, 'what has happened? Have I offended you? I have tried all day to see you—but in vain.'

Sophia shook her head.

'It is nothing,' she said, with a strangely constrained air about her,—an enforced calm, which condemned Jane to silence against her will.

John Bauer's eyes meantime never left

her, but with a true instinct of delicacy he did not speak.

‘Zee must not tink, my Sophie, dat I and die tante ’ave forgotten zee,’ said Uncle Louis, taking her cold hands in his. ‘Die leetle Jane komm seldom, but zee lif in our house, and are to us as a daughter.’

At the word ‘daughter,’ a mute sob heaved Sophia’s breast. By a great effort she calmed herself, then sat rigid as a statue under the glitter of the clustering lights, the background of evergreens and flowers rising behind.

‘I have no father,’ she answered, in a dull voice,—‘no home. It is time this fiction should cease. I belong to no one. I want to go away. Aunt Amelia hates me. As to my other aunt—’ and she fixed her deep eyes on Lady Danvers, but was met by a glance so cold, she instantly dropped them.

Her words thrilled painfully through the room.

‘My dear girl!’ cried Aunt Amelia, running up to her and seizing her hand, ‘it is you who divide yourself from me.’

‘And I?’ exclaimed Uncle Louis, his red face the picture of consternation,—‘do I not loofe zee?’

Everyone had risen and gathered round Sophia.

‘This is most unbecoming,’ said Lady Danvers severely. ‘A young woman in your position, with neither means nor ability to maintain herself, should at least be grateful. Your accusations against my sister are most unjust. Collect yourself, Sophia; be reasonable.’

‘I will withdraw nothing!’ cried Sophia, rising to her feet, her cheeks suddenly aflame. ‘You forget I am your brother’s child, and as much unused to humiliation as yourself. Ever since I came here my life has been a torture,—a line has been drawn round me as if I were a pariah.’

Here her proud spirit gave way,—her voice broke—and a great heave stopped her.

‘You have no right to say that!’ came from Lady Danvers, who spoke with the accent of command.

‘You were not here—you cannot tell,’ answered Sophia, her brooding eyes fixed on the ground. ‘I am ready to go anywhere and do anything, but I will not remain here.’

Then the long pent-up sobs came like the outburst of a flood, sweeping away all

obstacles. Her heart was breaking within her, and covering her face with her hands, she sank upon a chair.

At this moment, John Bauer, whose blue eyes had never left her from the moment she entered, and, unperceived by all, had been kneeling at her feet, gazing up into her face, and thinking each movement and action more winning than the last—(honest John would have liked to fall headlong on the flowers, and cast them all into her lap, as an offering of his love)—now rose, and, before she was aware, seized both her hands.

‘It is a strange time to speak,’ he said, ‘what I have on my mind;—but to see you so distressed emboldens me. For God’s sake, Miss Escott, do not be unhappy—there is no need. Come home with me, and be my wife. Only love me a little,—put up with me, Sophia—Miss Escott, I mean. Adored Miss Escott! pardon me, I am very bold.’

As he spoke, he glanced pitifully into her face; while Jane, till now, utterly dumbfounded at the unexpected scene, made her way timidly to Sophia’s side.

‘Thank you, Mr Bauer,’ was Sophia’s answer, a proud bitterness in her voice,

as she hastily withdrew her hands, turning her speaking eyes on Aunt Amelia, sitting drowned in tears, half hidden by the creams and jellies, the tarts and sweetmeats, on which she had expended such loving care ; — Uncle Louis beside her, handkerchief in hand, giving vent to many smothered exclamations ; his keen eyes ranging dismally over the untouched feast, the Christmas tree in its bridal whiteness, the scented fountain gurgling to unconscious ears, the priceless plates empty, and that lordly *pokal*, rainbowed with gorgeous colours, brimming over with untasted wine : ‘ Allow me to ask, has Mrs Winter instructed you to say this ? ’

‘ Oh, Miss Escott,’ groaned John, unable to find suitable words, ‘ I have not deserved this ! ’

‘ Then why do you come here to make trouble and expose me to malignant remark ? Am I not miserable enough already ? Do you stand there to triumph over me ? ’

‘ Make trouble, Miss Escott ? Triumph over you ? What *can* you mean ? I am here to offer you my life, my fortune, my home, if you will accept them. What can a man do more ? If you do not like it, never mind. My furthest thought is to

trouble you. I should not have spoken for years, perhaps never, I am so unworthy, had I not thought I could be of use.'

John Bauer, from rosy red, had grown almost livid under his fair skin. Emotion, though it loosened his tongue, did not embellish his complexion; yet he stood his ground manfully, facing Sophia with a calm steadfastness which was not without its charm.

'Take me or leave me, Miss Escott. Remember I only ask for your regard. With me, you would be independent, and could live as you please.'

His grave, reasonable manner silenced her. For a moment, the prospect held out of a calm and peaceful home seemed to arrest her, but not for long.

'What does it matter,' she said, wringing her hands, 'what becomes of me? I thank you all the same, Mr Bauer, and I beg you to pardon me for the rudeness with which I have treated you. You are a good man, and deserve to be loved. My heart is broken, and not fit for you.'

Tears were coursing each other down worthy John's cheeks as he listened, and even Sophia's voice faltered as she said the last words.

‘I would not press you, or worry you, Miss Escott,’ said he, struggling vainly with his feelings. ‘But if, at any time, you want me, if I can serve you in any way—even as a brother—’ (spite of himself, the word came grudgingly)—‘if you require a home, and could bring yourself to accept mine, I shall always be ready.’

Poor John! Like many another man, he could not renounce the intoxicating draught that was presented to his lips,—shatter the delicious wine-cup which seemed within his grasp!

‘No, no, I can hold out no hope,’ and Sophia flung herself wildly backwards from where she stood. Spite of herself his pathetic devotion overcame her; but the image of her lost love rose up like a Nemesis between them. ‘It would be a shame to mislead you! Keep your love for some woman not doomed to misery like me. Good-bye, Mr Bauer, try to forget me,’ and, with a gesture full of charm, she offered him her hand.

‘Sophia!’ said Lady Danvers, with that judicial coolness of manner which always made her listened to, ‘pause before

you refuse such an offer. I am bound to tell you, you are committing an act of culpable folly. Mr Bauer, in the most generous and moving manner, offers you a magnificent position. Even you, with all your prejudices, cannot doubt his sincerity. You have been unhappy here, because you are dependent. You will be unhappy elsewhere for the same reason. I cannot altogether blame you. Brought up as you have been, it is but natural; but why refuse an offer which would relieve you from these mortifications?’

Sophia shook her head. ‘I am not a European,’ said she. ‘I do not appreciate the advantages of wealth. I have been taught to go where my heart leads me. It suits me.’

Notwithstanding the annoyance she was bound to feel, Lady Danvers was sensible that a certain respect for Sophia was growing upon her. Here was an utterly friendless girl resisting every offer to change her mind, with a courage which, however she might depreciate it in principle, recommended itself to her feelings. Never acting upon impulse herself, she felt a kindred spirit in her new niece.

An audible groan broke from Uncle Louis. Unable any longer to restrain himself, he rushed forward, and seizing upon Sophia strained her in his arms.

‘My schilds, my bootiful schilds, don’t break die hearts! Don’t sacrifice yourself. Listen to der poor old oheim. Take die goote offer of der honest Johann. Ees hav a heart of golds. Take him vor my sake—die sake of dee old man who ’ave looved yee.’

Here he stopped ; no more words would come.

‘No, Uncle Louis, no,’ said John Bauer, interposing in a calmer voice. ‘I appreciate your kindness, but no one shall urge Miss Escott on my account. Although every word I hear is like a sentence of death to me, no one shall try to force her. Now nothing remains but for me to bid you all good-bye, and to thank you for the kindness which I feel I have abused. When I am a little recovered,’ and he held out his hand to Aunt Amelia, who, with a fresh burst of tears, accepted it, ‘I will come again. Till then, adieu!’

With one last long look at Sophia, standing under the burning lights, her

queen-like head crowned with that natural diadem of hair, bent down as if to meet the fury of the tempest which was passing over her,—and a formal bow to Lady Danvers, standing at the head of the table, he hastily left the room.

END OF VOL. II.



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